PUBLIC DEBATE ON THE FUTURE HEALTH PRIORITIES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Enhancing health security

What is the topic about?

Health security refers to the activities and measures taken at the global, national, regional and local levels to ensure the protection of people's health against threats or events that could harm it. These measures focus on preventing, detecting, and responding to a broad range of health threats. Health security addresses four main threats. The first set of threats arises from emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases with potential to cause epidemics and pandemics, such as influenza, Ebola or COVID-19, with responses including efforts to prevent the spread of disease, vaccination campaigns and the establishment of treatment protocols. The second is bioterrorism, and responses include safeguarding against the intentional release of biological agents, whether these are bacteria, viruses, or toxins, that can harm health. The third category includes natural disasters, such as earthquakes or extreme weather events, with responses ensuring that healthcare facilities can continue operating during crises and that there are adequate supplies of necessary medicines and medical equipment. The fourth includes the release of chemical, radiological, or nuclear materials that can have adverse health impacts.

Health security responses can be considered under three broad categories. The first is surveillance, which entails monitoring health threats to detect emerging risks early and coordinate an effective international response. The second is ensuring that health systems are resilient and can continue to function effectively and provide essential services in the face of different threats. The third is Research and Development, supporting research into new diagnostics, treatments and vaccines that can address emerging health threats.

Why is it important to EU Member States?

Health security is important for several interconnected reasons. The first is protection of public health, safeguarding the population from the threats listed above. When health security measures are robust, they can prevent or mitigate the effects of these threats and ensure that appropriate responses are rapidly deployed.

The second is safeguarding the economy. Disease outbreaks and other threats to health can have severe economic repercussions. For instance, pandemics can halt global trade, disrupt supply chains, impede tourism and stall various sectors of the economy. This leads to job losses, reductions in GDP, and potential financial crises. Strong health security helps protect economic stability by reducing the risk and impact of health threats.

European **Observatory** on Health Systems and Policies

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The third is societal cohesion. Large-scale health crises can strain societal structures, lead to fear and panic and, potentially, civil unrest. They can also create or exacerbate inequalities if certain populations are disproportionately affected and increase the appeal of populist voices promoting societal discord. A strong health security framework helps maintain societal cohesion by ensuring that populations are protected and adequately supported during health emergencies.

The fourth is protecting health systems. An outbreak can overwhelm local and national health systems, leading to reduced capacity to address other health concerns. Health security helps ensure that health systems remain functional and resilient in the face of increased demand.

The fifth relates to trust. Effective and transparent health security measures can foster trust in government, public health institutions, and international organizations, including the EU. Trust is also vital if the public are to follow health guidelines, especially during crises.

Finally, there is an ethical imperative that goes beyond the pragmatic case for strengthening health security to ensure the well-being and safety of populations from health threats. This involves not only reactive measures but proactive ones, like ensuring equitable access to healthcare, vaccines and treatments.

In summary, health security is a foundational aspect of maintaining the wellbeing, stability, and progress of societies in the face of health threats. Given the multifaceted impacts of health crises on individuals, communities and nations, health security is indispensable.

What has the EU done to date?

The foundation of health security in the EU is the European Health Union (EHU), designed as a means to enable Member States, working with the WHO and others, to prepare and respond together to health crises, ensuring that medical supplies are available, affordable and innovative, and that governments work together to improve prevention, treatment and aftercare for disease. The EHU has been operationalised by a range of measures, including new mandates for existing agencies (the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA)), the creation of a new body within the Commission (the European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA)) and several new Regulations.

Regulation (EU) 2022/2371 on serious cross-border threats to health establishes the 'Union prevention, preparedness and response plan' to complement national prevention, preparedness and response plans, consistent with the WHO emergency preparedness and response framework set out in the International Health Regulations. It includes measures related to surveillance, testing, contact tracing, laboratories, training of healthcare staff and specialised treatment or intensive care. Its implementation is monitored through triannual reports from each Member State on prevention, preparedness and response planning and implementation, assessed by ECDC, and feeding into a Commission Report on Prevention, Preparedness and Response Planning.

The Regulation is supported by a Health Security Committee composed of Member State representatives, acting at two working levels: a senior working group for regular discussions on serious cross-border threats to health and technical working groups to discuss specific topics, if necessary.

The Regulation also provides for joint procurement of medical countermeasures, an initiative also open to European Free Trade Association and candidate countries, as well as microstates in Europe.

Surveillance falls within the remit of ECDC, which monitors and evaluates a number of dedicated networks, monitors disease burden, and develops and models scenarios and responses. It also manages a new Early Warning and Response System and, with other agencies, risk assessments, while supporting EU reference laboratories.

The Regulation also makes provision for the Union-level recognition of a public health emergency, advised by a committee on when to declare and terminate one and how to respond, as well as for the enactment of temporary public health measures.

Directive (EU) 2022/2557 on the resilience of critical entities establishes rules for the identification of critical entities of particular European significance. Member States must develop national strategies to enhance resilience and carry out risk assessments at least every 4 years, identifying the risks that may significantly disrupt the provision of essential services and taking appropriate measures to mitigate them.

Key takeaways

The experience of the pandemic has brought health security higher on the European agenda. A series of measures have been adopted but their success depends, to a considerable extent, on what is in place in Member States. Thus, it will only be possible to develop an effective European response to a health threat if it is identified early by national surveillance systems. Similarly, the adoption of responses, such as restrictions on movement in a pandemic, are extremely time-critical, with a delay of even a few days risking a massive increase in cases, decisions that lie within the competence of Member States. A further problem is that, to employ a well-worn cliché, microorganisms do not respect boundaries. This means that it is dependent on global action and, specifically, agreement on strengthening of existing institutions and agreements and creation of new ones, most notably a pandemic treaty. Considerable ambition and commitment at both the EU and Member State levels will be necessary to carry forward negotiations on such a treaty. Finally, within the EU, it remains to be seen how some new entities, especially HERA, will operate and work together.

**BRIEFING
PAPER**

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Further reading

Gallina S. Preparing Europe for future health threats and crises: the European Health Union. Euro Surveill. 2023;28(5):2300066.

Wouters O, Foreman R, Anderson M, Mossialos E, McKee M. The launch of the EU Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA): improving global pandemic preparedness? Health Policy 2023; 133: 104844

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