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The Swedish Cancer Society's feedback on the EU Cardiovascular Health Plan

Summary

Many risk factors are shared by cardiovascular disease and cancer, two of the EU's most pressing public health challenges. Preventing disease is essential to saving lives and safeguarding healthcare resources. The Swedish Cancer Society's response to this call for evidence therefore focuses on prevention. We urge that this pillar of the EU Cardiovascular Health Plan be ambitious and decisive, implementing evidence-based initiatives aligned with Europe's Beating Cancer Plan.

Tobacco: Tobacco use is a major preventable cause of disease in Europe. Use of all tobacco and nicotine products is linked to increased risk of ill-health. Use of oral nicotine and e-cigarettes increases the risk of tobacco smoking. In Sweden, the use of nicotine pouches and e-cigarettes is rising sharply, especially among women and young people, signalling expanding dependence. Updates to the Tobacco Taxation Directive (TTD) and Tobacco Products Directive (TPD) are critical to reverse this development. We support the inclusion of new products, such as nicotine analogues and synthetic nicotine, in the TTD. We call for strict flavour regulations as well as plain packaging in the TPD, empowering Member States to phase out sales entirely. Both tobacco and nicotine should also be considered in an EU protocol on health checks for early detection of cardiovascular disease.

Alcohol: There is no safe level of alcohol consumption. Alcohol increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, coronary heart disease, atrial fibrillation, heart failure, stroke, and at least seven types of cancer. Measures such as health warnings, ingredient listings, and stricter marketing restrictions are crucial to raise awareness and reduce the product's attractiveness. Harmonised ingredient lists and mandatory health warnings would provide consumers with clear information, enabling informed choices and countering the widespread underestimation of alcohol-related risks.

Healthy diets: Obesity is a growing public health threat globally and in Europe, contributing to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension, certain cancers, liver disease, musculoskeletal problems, and mental health conditions. Overweight and obesity cause over 1.2 million deaths annually in the European region. Childhood obesity is rising sharply, driven by aggressive marketing of unhealthy foods. The EU can play a key role in implementing measures to halt this trend, including marketing restrictions and mandatory front-of-pack nutrition labelling, as well as supporting its Member States in implementing fiscal policies.

Environment: Environmental factors, including exposure to chemicals, radiation, and air pollution, increase the risk of NCDs such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, and respiratory diseases. The EU must strengthen its efforts to reduce environmental risk factors for NCDs across all Member States.

Full response

The Swedish Cancer Society is an independent charity organisation established in 1951. We are one of the largest research funders in Sweden, and our vision is to defeat cancer. Our goal is to reduce the number of people affected by cancer, ensure that more patients survive, and that everyone has the best possible quality of life, both during and after cancer.

Many risk factors are shared by cardiovascular disease and cancer, two of the EU's most pressing public health challenges, as well as several other non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Preventing disease is essential to reducing the overall burden, saving lives, and safeguarding the significant resources of healthcare systems and society. For this reason, we are focusing our consultation response on the prevention pillar of the upcoming EU Cardiovascular Health Plan. We believe this pillar must be ambitious, decisive, and focused on the implementation of outstanding initiatives outlined in Europe's Beating Cancer Plan.

Tobacco

Tobacco use is associated with 16% of all cardiovascular disease deaths in the European Region, translating to more than 670,000 lost lives every year.¹ At the same time, it remains the leading cause of preventable cancer in the EU.²

Nicotine is the key driver of tobacco addiction. Emerging products often deliver high nicotine levels, heightening addiction risks, particularly for youth. Evidence also links nicotine itself to higher blood pressure and increased heart rate, which can increase the risk of cardiovascular disease. Nicotine can also affect brain development and has been linked to adverse reproductive and fetal outcomes.³ Nicotine has also been found to be associated with mental ill-health.⁴ Research further shows that nicotine increases risk of greater alcohol use.⁵ These wide-ranging harms underscore

¹ [European Heart Network](#)

² [Association of European Cancer Leagues](#)

³ [World Heart Federation](#)

⁴ [Nicotine & Tobacco Research](#)

⁵ [Centralförbundet för alkohol- och narkotikaupplysning](#)

the urgent need for strong, comprehensive regulation of all nicotine-containing products.

In Sweden, the use of nicotine pouches (snus) and e-cigarettes (vapes) is rising sharply, with growth largely driven by uptake among women and young people. This increase signals a worrying expansion of nicotine dependence into new population groups and should be regarded as a serious warning sign for the rest of the EU.⁶

Urgent progress is needed to update the Tobacco Taxation Directive (TTD) and Tobacco Products Directive (TPD) to address evolving challenges in the market and consumption patterns. Increased tobacco taxes are known to reduce tobacco consumption faster than any other single measure, while simultaneously increasing revenue for governments.⁷ Enforcing advertising and marketing measures in line with the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control is also essential to reduce tobacco consumption and protect people from industry marketing tactics.

We are in favour of the TTD proposal put forward by the European Commission and strongly support the inclusion of new products, such as nicotine analogues and synthetic nicotine. In line with the objectives towards a tobacco-free generation in Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, we call for the upcoming TPD to include strict flavour regulations for all products and requirements for plain tobacco packaging. The EU should empower Member States to gradually phase out the sale of tobacco and nicotine products.

Considering the strong links to cardiovascular disease, both tobacco and nicotine should also be included in a potential EU protocol on health checks for early detection of cardiovascular disease.

Further evidence on tobacco and nicotine:

- [World Heart Federation policy brief on nicotine and cardiovascular health](#)

⁶ [Cancerfonden](#)

⁷ [World Health Organisation](#)

- [Data from the Swedish Public Health Agency on the use of tobacco and nicotine products in Sweden](#)
- [Systematic review by the Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services \(SBU\) on the associations between the use of e-cigarettes or snus and tobacco smoking](#)
- [Report on the existing knowledge about the harmful effects of tobacco and nicotine products by the Swedish Public Health Agency](#)
- [Report by the Institute of Environmental Medicine \(IMM\) at Karolinska Institutet on the health effects of new nicotine and tobacco products](#)
- [Overview of Sweden's tobacco prevention efforts by the Swedish Public Health Agency](#)
- [Cancerfonden report on Sweden's road to reduced tobacco smoking](#)

Alcohol

There is no safe level of alcohol consumption that does not affect health. Alcohol is associated with an increased risk of developing various NCDs, as well as mental health and behavioural conditions. For example, an estimated 474,000 deaths from cardiovascular disease were caused by alcohol consumption in 2019.⁸ Despite common belief, there is no solid scientific evidence that low to moderate alcohol intake offers protection against cardiovascular disease. In fact, more recent high-quality studies show that even small amounts increase the risk of serious conditions such as high blood pressure, coronary heart disease, atrial fibrillation, heart failure, and stroke.⁹

Alcohol also causes at least seven types of cancer, including some of the most common, such as bowel cancer and female breast cancer.¹⁰ A recent Swedish study showed that a 1L per capita increase in alcohol consumption was associated with a 0.9% rise in total cancer mortality among women and a 1.1% increase among men.¹¹

⁸ [World Health Organisation](#)

⁹ [European Heart Network](#)

¹⁰ [World Health Organisation](#)

¹¹ [Drug and Alcohol Review](#)

Measures such as health warnings, ingredient listings, and stricter marketing restrictions are essential for raising awareness and reducing the attractiveness of alcohol. We underline the particular importance of introducing a harmonised list of ingredients for all alcoholic beverages at EU level, as well as mandatory health warnings on all alcohol packaging. Providing consumers with clear and accessible information is crucial to enable informed choices about their consumption, counteracting the widespread lack of awareness among the population.

Healthy diets

Obesity rates have risen steadily worldwide over the past three decades, with more people now living with obesity than with underweight in almost every region. Obesity is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension, certain cancers, liver disorders, musculoskeletal problems, and mental health conditions.¹² In Sweden, obesity has surpassed smoking as the leading risk factor for heart attacks among young adults.¹³

This is not only a global public health threat – the obesity epidemic is also affecting Europe. Recent estimates suggest that overweight and obesity cause more than 1.2 million deaths across the European region each year. Among children (aged 5-19 years) specifically, the prevalence of overweight and obesity has nearly tripled in boys and more than doubled in girls.¹⁴

Evidence shows that fiscal policies, marketing restrictions, and food and beverage labelling are effective tools to address the growing public health challenge of overweight and obesity, as well as to ensure availability, accessibility and affordability of healthy foods.¹⁵

To support Member States in this regard, we believe the EU Action Plan on Childhood Obesity 2014-2020 should be evaluated and updated. Additionally, the EU should enforce mandatory front-of-pack nutrition labelling. Labelling

¹² [World Heart Federation](#)

¹³ [European Heart Journal](#)

¹⁴ [World Health Organisation](#)

¹⁵ [Common actions for the prevention of overweight and obesity among children \(CAPOC\)](#)

systems can either be harmonised across Member States or differ between them, as long as they are mandatory and front-of-pack.

There is solid evidence showing that the dietary habits of children and young people are influenced by the powerful and targeted marketing of unhealthy food.¹⁶ Several European countries are already reviewing their legislation in this area, including Norway and Denmark. We believe it would be desirable for the EU to raise the level of ambition across all Member States, especially as food marketing increasingly takes place on digital platforms. Clearer and more comprehensive marketing restrictions at EU level are needed, covering all marketing channels.

Further evidence on healthy diets:

- [CAPOC - An umbrella review of the evidence on structural prevention policies and prevention of overweight and obesity among children](#)
- [In your face - About the online food environment of children and their exposure to digital marketing of food and beverages](#)
- [Trends in risk factors among young patients with acute myocardial infarction: a nationwide cohort study | European Heart Journal - Quality of Care and Clinical Outcomes | Oxford Academic](#)

Environment

It is not only our lifestyle habits that constitute a preventable risk for NCDs. Both the internal and external environment – for example, workplaces and public spaces – can, through exposure to chemicals, radiation, and particles in air and water, increase the risk of NCDs such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, and respiratory disease.¹⁷ For example, an estimated 400 people in Sweden develop lung cancer each year as a result of air pollution, including emissions from traffic.¹⁸ The societal responsibility to reduce environmental factors that may lead to NCDs is crucial, which is why the Swedish Cancer Society calls on the EU to strengthen legislation and policies aimed at reducing environmental risk factors for NCDs across all Member States.

¹⁶ [World Health Organisation](#)

¹⁷ [World Health Organisation](#)

¹⁸ [Swedish Public Health Agency](#)