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## New study explores individual and contextual determinants of behaviour change for cancer prevention in the European Union

### A qualitative study to inform adoption of the European Code Against Cancer

**Lyon, France, 18 March 2026** – A new multicountry qualitative study coordinated by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) explores barriers and facilitators to adopting the [European Code Against Cancer](#). An initiative led by IARC and co-funded by the European Commission and IARC, the European Code Against Cancer provides evidence-based recommendations to help citizens reduce their cancer risk and is a key tool to implement the prevention goals of Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan. Based on the fourth edition of the European Code Against Cancer, the study published in *The Lancet Regional Health – Europe*<sup>1</sup> suggests that although many Europeans are motivated to reduce their cancer risk, everyday structural and social barriers can make it difficult to adopt the recommended preventive behaviours.

#### Study results

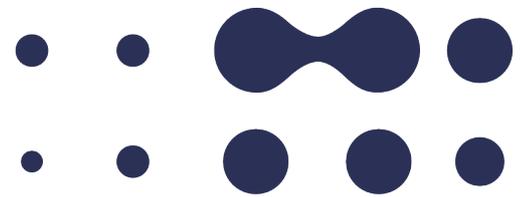
The study, conducted across nine countries in the European Union and involving 141 adults aged 18–65 years, explored how people perceive cancer prevention advice and the factors that influence their ability to adopt preventive actions. Although participants across countries reported strong motivation to live healthier lives and reduce their risk of cancer, they also described several barriers that can make preventive behaviours difficult to sustain. These included low health literacy, misinformation, the cost of healthy food, limited time available because of work and family responsibilities, social norms around behaviours such as alcohol consumption, and difficulties accessing preventive health-care services such as screening programmes.

The study also found that awareness of the European Code Against Cancer remains limited. Only about 24% of participants reported that they had previously heard of the European Code Against Cancer. This highlights opportunities to strengthen the dissemination and communication of cancer prevention recommendations across the European Union.

“Many people want to take steps to reduce their cancer risk, but their ability to do so is often shaped by the environments in which they live and work,” says IARC visiting scientist Dr Ariadna Feliu, lead author and co-principal investigator of the study. “These findings highlight the importance of creating supportive environments that make healthy choices the easiest choice for everyone.”

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<sup>1</sup> Feliu A, Barrera B, Boland V, Drury A, Hâncean MG, Geantă M, et al. (2026). Exploring individual and contextual determinants of cancer prevention behaviour change in the European Union: a qualitative study to inform implementation of the European Code Against Cancer. *Lancet Reg Health Eur*. Published online 4 March 2026. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2026.101633>



The participants also identified several factors that support cancer preventive behaviours. These facilitators included early health education, supportive social networks, clear public health messaging, enabling policies (e.g. smoke-free laws), and accessible and equitable health-care services.

“The European Code Against Cancer provides practical, evidence-based actions that people can take to reduce their cancer risk,” says IARC scientist Dr Carolina Espina, co-principal investigator and co-author of the study. “This study helps us better understand how people experience prevention in their daily lives and how we can strengthen the awareness and adoption of these recommendations across the European Union.”

The findings underline the importance of combining prevention focused on individual behaviour changes with policies and environments that enable healthier choices. Insights from this research helped in the development of the newest edition of the European Code Against Cancer and will inform ongoing work to promote the European Code Against Cancer as part of wider efforts to strengthen cancer prevention in the European Union.

### **Notes to editors**

Cancer remains a major cause of illness and death in the European Union. In 2023, there were about 2.9 million new cancer cases and 1.3 million deaths from cancer in the European Union, and projections suggest that the number of new cases per year could reach 3.8 million by 2050. Despite improvements in cancer detection and treatment, the growing burden continues to strain health-care systems and societies. However, about 40% of cancer cases could be prevented by reducing exposure to known risk factors. This makes prevention a crucial and cost-effective strategy.

Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan, launched by the European Commission in 2021, places strong emphasis on cancer prevention and improving public awareness of cancer risk factors. Within this framework, the European Code Against Cancer serves as a key tool to translate European Union prevention goals into clear, evidence-based recommendations for citizens.

### **For more information, please contact**

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The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) is part of the World Health Organization. Its mission is to coordinate and conduct research on the causes of human cancer, the mechanisms of carcinogenesis, and to develop scientific strategies for cancer control. The Agency is involved in both epidemiological and laboratory research and disseminates scientific information through publications, meetings, courses, and fellowships. If you wish your name to be removed from our press release emailing list, please write to [com@iarc.who.int](mailto:com@iarc.who.int).