

March 12, 2024

Feedback from the European Head and Neck Society on the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on vaccine-preventable cancers

On behalf of the [European Head and Neck Society \(EHNS\)](#), a pan-European, multidisciplinary body that brings together head and neck cancer specialists, oral and plastic surgeons, radiation therapists, medical oncologists, imaging specialists and pathologists, the [Make Sense campaign](#) is writing to the European Commission regarding the publication of the proposal for a Council Recommendation on vaccine-preventable cancers.

Following the [letter](#) we shared in February 2023 regarding the initiative to increase the uptake of vaccination against HPV, we have read the European Commission's proposal for a Council Recommendation on vaccine-preventable cancers and are pleased to see there are a number of mentions of head and neck cancer and its link to HPV.

While there has been significant progress in the fight against HPV-related cancers over the last decade, many studies have shown that the incidence of HPV-related head and neck cancers is increasing year on year in Europe, particularly affecting younger adults.¹ This is a worrying trend that is only expected to grow as, crucially, HPV-related head and neck cancers affect both males and females – which adds both complexity and scale to the issues posed by these cancers. In addition, in comparison to cervical cancer, no clear pre-cancerous lesions for head and neck cancer have been identified, and there are no validated screening protocols for early-stage detection of these malignancies.²

For these reasons, we believe that HPV-related head and neck cancers pose a significant public health problem for Europe which needs to be addressed with urgency. Therefore, while we welcome the Council Recommendations to increase the uptake of vaccination against HPV, we would like to share some additional suggestions on the proposed text for your consideration. Our specific feedback is listed below.

- We welcome Europe's Beating Cancer Plan objective to fully vaccinate at least 90% of the Union target population of girls against HPV and significantly increase the vaccination of boys against HPV by 2030. However, we believe that to **truly reduce the incidence of head and neck cancer**, a devastating disease, **firmer targets for vaccination among boys need to be adopted** and communicated to Member States. This includes working to surpass Europe's Beating Cancer Plan uptake target by **aiming for 90% vaccination coverage for all genders**.
- There also continues to be a significant lack of awareness and education around the link between HPV and head and neck cancers. It is our opinion that communications encouraging the uptake for gender-neutral HPV vaccination should **specifically refer to head and neck cancers as a potential risk**. We believe that highlighting a cancer that affects both females and males will help communicate that **HPV-related cancers are not necessarily gender-specific** and further **highlight the advantages of gender-neutral vaccination**. A survey commissioned by the *Make Sense* campaign in 2020 demonstrated that only 21% of the

general public from countries across Europe identified HPV as a risk factor for head and neck cancers, highlighting the need for more awareness and education.³

We welcome the opportunity to discuss the above points with you further. As head and neck cancer specialists, we continue to be concerned about the risk that head and neck cancers pose for Europe and strongly believe that increasing the uptake of gender-neutral HPV vaccination will help to reduce the incidence of head and neck cancer, a life-altering disease.

Submitted by Professor René Leemans, on behalf of the *Make Sense* campaign, and Professor Giovanni Succo, President of the EHNS

For further information please contact secretariat@makesensecampaign.eu

About the EHNS

The European Head and Neck Society (EHNS) is an international non-profit association based in Belgium. The EHNS is composed of individuals, national and multinational societies, and associated study groups oriented towards head and neck cancer research, training and treatment throughout Europe. Individuals from the rest of the world are also welcome to apply for membership. The intent of the EHNS is to promote exchange of knowledge in all aspects of head and neck neoplastic diseases and to promote the highest standards of research, education and training, disease prevention and patient care. For more information on the society, please visit: ehns.org.

About the *Make Sense* Campaign

The *Make Sense* campaign, initiated by the European Head and Neck Society (EHNS), aims to raise awareness of head and neck cancer and ultimately improve outcomes for patients with the disease. It will do this through:

- Education on disease prevention
- Driving understanding of the signs and symptoms of the disease
- Encouraging earlier presentation, diagnosis and referral

The *Make Sense* campaign is supported by Merck and MSD. More information about the campaign is available at makesensecampaign.eu, on [X](#) (formerly known as Twitter), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#).

References:

1. Gormley et al. [Reviewing the Epidemiology of Head and Neck Cancer: Definitions, Trends and Risk Factors](#). British Dental Journal 2022.
2. Galati et al. [HPV and Head and Neck Cancers: Towards Early Diagnosis and Prevention](#). Tumour Virus Research 2022.
3. Make Sense Campaign. [‘Stay Head and Neck Cancer Aware’ 2020 Head and Neck Cancer Awareness Survey Factsheet](#). Accessed March 2024.