



Questions and answers: the new EU strategic framework on health and safety at work

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What is the EU strategic framework on health and safety at work and why do we need it?

The EU strategic framework on health and safety at work identifies key challenges and actions to protect the almost 170 million workers in the EU from work-related accidents and diseases. It serves to mobilise EU institutions, Member States, social partners and other relevant stakeholders around common priorities on workers' protection.

The priorities of the previous framework (2014-2020) remain relevant today. However, further action in the EU is needed to make workplaces fit for the green, digital and demographic transitions, to reflect the changes to the traditional work environment, and to draw lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In light of this, the 2021-2027 strategic framework focuses on three objectives:

- Anticipating and managing **change** in the new world of work;
- Improving **prevention** of work-related accidents and illnesses;
- Increasing **preparedness** for any potential future health crises.

The framework also aims to ensure that the EU maintains its leadership role in promoting high standards for safety and health at work internationally.

What are the effects of a changing world of work and the green and digital transition on occupational safety and health? How will these effects be addressed?

Digital transition:

Digital technologies can provide workers, including workers with disabilities or older workers, and their employers with digitally enabled solutions to support their health and wellbeing. They can also improve workers' health and safety by taking over dangerous and monotonous tasks.

However, these developments can also create new risks or exacerbate existing risks to workers' physical and mental health. As a result of the pandemic, close to 40% of workers began to work remotely full time. Together with other remote-working trends, such as permanent connectivity, a lack of social interaction, and increased use of Information and communications technology (ICT), this gives rise to psychosocial and ergonomic risks.

As part of the new strategic framework, the Commission will among others review the [Workplaces Directive](#) and the [Display Screen Equipment Directive](#) (by 2023).

Green transition:

While we prepare for a climate-neutral future, including the opportunities it offers through green jobs, the current limit values of certain hazardous substances used in existing and emerging sectors need to be reviewed. This concerns for instance lead and cobalt, hazardous substances frequently used in renewable energy technologies and in battery production. As part of the renovation wave, which aims to make buildings fit for a climate-neutral future in the context of the European Green Deal, exposure to asbestos can also become a health-risk factor.

Under the new strategic framework, the Commission will propose protective limit values on asbestos in the [Asbestos at Work Directive](#) (in 2022), on lead and diisocyanates in the [Chemical Agents Directive](#) (in 2022), and on cobalt in the [Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive](#) (Q1 2024).

Mental health:

Already before the pandemic, mental health problems affected about 84 million people in the EU. Half of EU workers consider stress to be common in their workplace, and stress contributes to around half of all lost working days. Nearly 80% of managers are concerned about work-related stress.

As a result of the pandemic, close to 40% of workers began to work remotely full time. This blurs the traditional boundaries between work and private life and together with other remote-working trends, such as permanent connectivity, a lack of social interaction, and increased use of ICT, has given and additional rise to psychosocial and ergonomic risks.

In cooperation with Member States and social partners, the Commission will prepare a non-legislative EU-level initiative related to mental health at work that assesses emerging issues related to workers' mental health and puts forward guidance for action before the end of 2022.

What are benefits of risk prevention?

Preventing risks and promoting safe and healthy working conditions contributes to the well-being and health of workers and their families. It also improves companies' productivity and competitiveness. Apart from the human imperative, there is also a strong economic case for a high level of occupational health and safety (OSH) protection. Work-related accidents and illnesses cost the EU economy over 3.3% of GDP annually, whereas estimates show that for every euro invested in OSH, the return for the employer is around twice as much.

Moreover, sound occupational health and safety rules improve the sustainability of social security systems, reduce healthcare costs and help to address the long-term effects of an ageing population.

Some examples of risk prevention in practice provided by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA):

- In Croatia, a manufacturer of perfumes and toiletry preparations [replaced hazardous resin with 3D printing to make moulds](#). This resulted in a reduced risk of developing, for example, allergic contact dermatitis and occupational asthma, and greatly increased workers' productivity levels.
- In Estonia, a cleaning company [introduced measures to reduce the risk of exposure to dangerous chemicals in cleaning agents](#). Extensive training, simplified safety and health guidelines, and provision of personal protective equipment contributed to the effectiveness of the new approach.
- In Germany, a [safe and economical procedure was developed for handling asbestos-containing putty in the glazing trade](#). The procedure is simple and inexpensive, making it feasible to implement even for small businesses, and ensures that workers and customers are protected from harmful levels of asbestos.

How successful has EU action been in reducing the number of accidents at work and improving working conditions?

The last three decades have brought significant progress in occupational safety and health: between 1994 and 2018, fatal accidents at work in the EU decreased by about 70%. The ongoing legislative procedure on limits for acrylonitrile, nickel compounds and benzene under the [Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive](#) will help increase protection from carcinogenic and mutagenic substances for more than 1 million workers.

Despite this progress, there were still more than 3,300 fatal accidents and 3.1 million non-fatal accidents in the EU-27 in 2018. Furthermore, more than 200,000 workers die each year from work-related illnesses. Maintaining and improving protection standards for workers is therefore an ongoing challenge and necessity.

What is the 'vision zero' approach to work-related deaths in the EU?

The EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027 promotes a 'vision zero' approach to work-related deaths in the EU. The aim is to mobilise all relevant EU and international actors around the ambitious objective eliminate work-related deaths, accidents and diseases. The main actors in this regard are Member States (notably labour inspectorates), social partners, employers and workers, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and other international bodies.

Preventing work-related deaths will only be possible by:

- Thorough investigation of accidents and deaths at the workplace;
- Identifying and addressing the causes of these accidents and deaths;
- Increasing awareness of the risks related to work-related accidents and diseases;
- Strengthening enforcement of existing rules and guidelines.

What is the purpose of the second-stage consultation of social partners launched today on the risks related to exposure to chemical agents and asbestos at work?

Today, the Commission is launching a [second-stage consultation of social partners](#) that will be

running until 30 September 2021. The purpose of the consultation is to collect the views of EU trade unions and employers' organisations on the content of envisaged EU action to revise directives that protect workers from risks related to chemical agents at work (concerning lead and diisocyanates) and to exposure to asbestos at work. The first-stage consultation was open from December 2020 to February 2021. Based on the replies received, the Commission concluded that there is a need for further EU action.

Occupational cancer is the largest cause of work-related deaths in the EU, being primarily caused by exposure to carcinogenic substances such as asbestos. Diisocyanates are skin and respiratory sensitisers (also called asthmagens) potentially causing occupational asthma and dermal occupational disease. Lead and its compounds are key occupational reprotoxicants affecting reproductive functions.

During the social partner consultation process, the social partners may decide to stop the procedure and negotiate an agreement among themselves. If they do not signal their wish to do so, the Commission will put forward an initiative in 2022.

How has the current pandemic affected the health and safety of EU workers and how can we better prepare for potential future health crises?

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected people who have been working at their usual workplaces, in particular essential workers in the health or care sectors were at increased risk of being infected with the virus, while also working under very challenging conditions. People working from home were exposed to psychosocial and ergonomic risks due to, among others, the blurring of boundaries between work and private life, lack of social interaction or ill-adapted working environments.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined that occupational safety and health is key for the safety of workers and the continuation of essential services. It has also shown that measures of increased hygiene, non-pharmaceutical interventions and mental health support should be given greater priority by improving the timeliness and effectiveness of the response to such crises. Synergies between OSH and public health should be further developed.

Drawing on these lessons, the Commission will launch an in-depth assessment of the effects of the pandemic and the efficiency of the EU and national OSH frameworks to develop emergency procedures and guidance for the rapid deployment, implementation and monitoring of measures in potential future health crises, in close cooperation with public health actors.

How will micro and small businesses be supported in protecting their workers' health and safety?

The Commission will work with the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) to develop supporting tools and guidance for employers to comply with occupational safety and health legislation. These tools will in particular address micro and small enterprises. The Commission will also call upon Member States to provide improved guidance and training for risk-assessment and prevention measures, in particular to micro-enterprises and SMEs.

What EU funding is available to support health and safety at work?

EU funds, notably the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Cohesion policy funds, can be used to mobilise investment for actions in occupational safety and health. Over half of the new EU long-term budget and NextGenerationEU will support the modernisation of the European Union, notably through investing in research and innovation, green and digital transitions, preparedness, recovery and resilience.

Other available funds are:

- the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), which can support measures to promote sustainable and quality employment, and social inclusion;
- the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which can contribute with better adapted work environments, digital solutions and equipment;
- the new EU health programme 'EU4Health 2021-2027', which will also provide significant support to the fight against cancer and will contribute to disease prevention and health promotion in an ageing population, and increased surveillance of health threats.

What are the next steps for the EU strategic framework and how will it be implemented?

The Commission calls on Member States to update and draw up their national occupational safety and health strategies in line with this strategic framework – in cooperation with social partners – to ensure that the new measures reach the workplace.

Implementation of this strategic framework will be underpinned by: (i) a strengthened evidence base, through research and data collection both at EU and national level; (ii) strong social dialogue; (iii) mobilised funding, including through EU funds; (iv) improved enforcement and monitoring of existing legislation; and (v) awareness raising and capacity building.

A 2023 OSH summit, gathering the EU institutions, Member States, social partners, the EU-OSHA and other relevant stakeholders, will allow taking stock of progress on this ambitious framework as well as an assessment of adaptation in light of the rapidly changing context.

For More Information

[EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027](#)

[Staff Working Document accompanying the Strategic Framework](#)

[Synopsis report accompanying the Strategic Framework](#)

[Press release: Occupational safety and health in a changing world of work](#)

[Factsheet: Occupational safety and health in a changing world of work](#)

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