

# EU Health Security Committee

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## Role of the HSC

The Health Security Committee supports the Member States in their efforts to prepare for health crises, to tackle health crises efficiently and to mitigate the impacts of health crisis on citizen and society.

It ensures the coordination of response to public health crises at EU level.

Its role is:

1. to ensure that effective preparedness mechanisms are in place
2. to coordinate public health risk assessment and management of serious cross-border health threats in the EU, in particular in crisis situation.

## As a matter of fact

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The EU Health Security Committee (HSC) is an informal advisory group on health security at the European level. It brings together high-level representatives from the Ministries of Health of the 27 EU Member States, Norway, Iceland and Switzerland under the Commission chairmanship. European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), European Medicines Agency (EMA) and WHO are observers to the HSC.

The work of the HSC is organised by the European Commission (secretariat) and prepared in three sections which deliver expertise on generic preparedness, pandemic influenza, and chemical and biological threats. In addition, the HSC Communicators' network supports Member States efforts on risk and crisis communication with the general public during a public health crisis.

The HSC holds twice a year plenary meetings in Luxembourg. In an emergency the HSC can meet through audio conferences, if necessary on a daily basis.

## History

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**2001** After the terrorist attacks and the deliberate release of anthrax toxins in the US, the **EU Health Security Committee was set up** by the EU health Ministers to coordinate and support the public health/health security preparedness and response capacity and planning of the Member States against biological and chemical agent attacks.

**2007** EU health Ministers agreed to extend the HSC mandate to include **pandemic preparedness and response** as well as **coordination of emergency planning at EU level**.

## HSC action

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The HSC provides a platform for exchange of information between the Member States and the Commission, gives advice and recommendations as regards preparedness, ensures coordination of preparedness plans, and discusses

the lessons learned from the past health emergency situations. During crisis situations, the HSC ensures exchange of information on public health measures and coherence of actions by Member States in order to **protect human health**.

In the past years it proved to be efficient at different occasions, in particular during the **H1N1 pandemic**.

## I. Crisis management

- (2009) During the pandemic (H1N1) the HSC was the key body for coordinating response in the health field EU. It held daily meetings during the peak of the pandemic and it was a platform for sharing information on and coordinating countermeasures: it identified risk groups for vaccination (children, elderly people and people with medical conditions), discussed availability of vaccines and their adverse effects, agreed on travel advice from the health perspective, advice on hygiene measures (hand washing and behaviour to prevent illness). It also ensured the links at international level, in particular exchanged information with WHO. The Committee worked in close collaboration with the national focal points of the EU Network for surveillance and control of communicable diseases and updated the EU legislation on communicable diseases in the light of the pandemic situation (case definition and reporting on H1N1). The Communicator's network of the Committee coordinated key messages on the pandemic to the health professional community and the public (e.g. leaflets, websites).
- (2011) Refugees / Migration following unrest in North African countries - the HSC discussed the risk of spread of communicable diseases in refugee camps in EU Member States and challenges for national healthcare that resulted thereof, and sanitary issues in the camps.
- (2010) Volcano ash cloud – the HSC met to discuss possible health impact of the volcano eruption; special issues were possible health effects from ash particles, interruption in transport of transplants and medical prescriptions for persons stranded abroad.
- (2008) Shortage of radio-isotopes used for medical purpose in the EU<sup>1</sup> - Following an incidental shut down of all three nuclear reactors in which radio-isotopes are produced in the EU, an emergency meeting of the HSC was convened in to exchange information on the situation and discuss possible actions which could be taken to counter the lack of medical radio-isotopes. Advice was given for alternative methods for diagnosis and treatment and fostering research and improved planning to ensure availability of radioisotopes in the future.

## II. Preparedness activities

### Generic preparedness

The HSC developed a technical guidance document on generic preparedness planning in 2009. The document gives guidance to Member States in order to reach minimal requirements in preparedness at national level and to ensure coherency between the national plans.

The document contains also a part on the cooperation between public health and law enforcement authorities at the national level, between Member States and at EU level, and provides a compilation of identified good practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Radio-isotopes (radiopharmaceuticals) play an important role in medicine, where they are used routinely in the clinics for the non-invasive diagnosis and treatment of various diseases, including some of the most important and frequent ones, like cancers and cardiovascular diseases.

## **Pandemic preparedness and response planning**

Focus is given specifically on pandemic preparedness. Pandemic preparedness planning underlines the need to work on coordination, monitoring and assessment of health risks, prevention and containment of diseases and the health system response including communication.

## **Communication to the public**

The Communicators network has been set up under the Health Security Committee to discuss communication strategies, and to provide coherent and reliable messages to the citizens, especially during public health crisis situations. Permanent contacts between the communicators allow for rapid information exchange in any situation.

## **Development of IT tools to ensure early warning and information exchange**

- **Rapid Alert System for chemicals (RAS CHEM):** IT tool for the early warning on chemical threats and information exchange on the risk to human health
- **Health Emergency & Diseases Information System (HEDIS):** a web-based platform where the HSC can get at any time an overview of the situation on an identified health threat.
- **MedISys** media monitoring tool used for the detection of new threats.

## **Exercises and trainings**

A number of simulation exercises with scenarios to test the coordination and management of health emergencies in the European Commission and in the Member States were carried out, e.g. on global outbreak of pandemic influenza, terrorist smallpox attack, contamination of food additives used in fitness centres, intoxication on board a cruise ship at the Danube. The purpose of these exercises and trainings is to test and identify gaps in risk management at European level and in the cooperation in and between Member States, the Commission, EU Agencies and between relevant sectors concerned.

## **Lessons learnt**

The HSC ensures the follow-up of the lessons learnt from the previous experience and crises.

## **Looking ahead**

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The importance of the Health Security Committee has been recognised by the Health Ministers in the EU Council at numerous occasions. Following their requests, the Commission is preparing a proposal on the formalisation of the Health Security Committee with a broader mandate.

## **More**

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Commission website: on the Health Security Committee:  
[http://ec.europa.eu/health/preparedness\\_response/hsc/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/health/preparedness_response/hsc/index_en.htm)