The COVID-19 pandemic puts enormous strain on healthcare systems. Most EU Member States have put in place measures to relieve pressure therefore helping in the diagnosis and treatment of the disease.

The rapid spread of the disease requires a rapid, proactive and comprehensive approach in order to delay its transmission and gain precious time for healthcare systems.

The ECDC has issued detailed guidelines on how to establish contingency measures for health systems\(^1\) and these EU recommendations are based on their work. In addition, the European Commission COVID-19 Advisory Panel\(^2\) has provided further guidance.

It is recommended that all Member States carefully review their strategies to alleviate pressure from healthcare systems by considering the recommendations below and deciding on the next steps in function of their national contexts. Tailor-made and country-specific approaches must be developed in line with the healthcare system organisation and the epidemiological situation. However, it is clear that all Member States must prepare for an eventual sustained high-pressure on healthcare systems.

These measures are essential to protect vulnerable populations, decrease the pressure on healthcare services and reduce mortality.

**WHERE TO FOCUS FIRST?**

1. Hospital preparedness is key: surge capacity plans must be developed and regularly adapted to the evolving situation; contingency plans must cover situations where there are shortages of critical equipment

2. Symptomatic patients must avoid infecting others: develop alternatives to limit avoidable presence at healthcare facilities (e.g. website to self-introduce symptoms to further instruct patients, apps to instruct patients whether they should report to a healthcare facility, teleconsultations, etc.)

3. Designate treatment facilities for mild, sub-intensive and intensive care needs

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Leverage knowledge: Enable rapid registering, appropriate training and reallocation of medical professionals such as qualified nurses and medicine students by e.g. online seminars for medical professionals and exchange of good practices at national and EU level.

Find alternatives: advising self-isolation at home under medical supervision until symptoms improve or worsen may be appropriate for mild cases.

Limit the spread: deny access to hospitals for family and friends of admitted patients.

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**HOW TO HELP HEALTHCARE WORKERS?**

Healthcare workers are our most important asset against COVID-19. All over the EU they are working tirelessly at great personal risk. It is crucial that concrete measures are taken to support them.

1. **Appropriate Personal Protective Equipment must always be prioritised for frontline staff.**
2. **Decrease the administrative workload for healthcare workers: for example providing sick leave certificates electronically or by phone.**
3. **Design support schemes to take care of their children and dependent family members such as keeping certain daycare centres open for them or providing financial support.**
4. **Provide logistical support as needed (repurpose hotels close to hospitals, transport services, handle groceries for them, etc.)**
5. **Develop psychological support schemes for healthcare workers.**

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