



# Healthy ageing for Europe's future: the value of adult immunisation



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## Event summary

In the midst of an evolving European demographic landscape, a pressing issue looms over the continent: how to ensure healthy ageing citizens, particularly with an ageing population expected to comprise nearly half of Europe within the next decade. On 1 October 2024, which is also the International day of older persons, Friends of Europe addressed this issue with a Policy Insight on “Healthy ageing for Europe’s future: the value of adult immunisation”. Speakers discussed how incentivising adult immunisation in the EU would contribute to the healthy ageing of older adults, by preventing infectious diseases and reducing the risks of comorbidities.

### Prioritising prevention and wellbeing in an ageing Europe

**Dharmendra Kanani**, Chief Operating Officer at Friends of Europe, kicked off the conversation, stressing the importance of shifting healthcare priorities towards prevention. As Europe braces for a dramatic shift in demographics, with a rising proportion of older citizens, the strain on healthcare systems is expected to grow. Immunisation was presented as a crucial tool to alleviate some of that pressure.

**Susie Barnes**, Senior Vice President for Global Medical Affairs and Vaccines at GSK, highlighted the challenges and opportunities of an ageing population. With a rising life expectancy, the need for immunisation has never been more urgent. As people live longer, they become more susceptible to preventable diseases, particularly those exacerbated by weakened immune systems. The discussion emphasised that with a culture of prevention embedded within healthcare systems, societies could reduce the strain on resources and increase people’s quality of life.

The economic implications of neglecting prevention were also clear. The panel discussed evidence suggesting that every euro spent on adult vaccination yields a four euro return, not just in healthcare savings, but also in broader societal benefits, such as reduced absenteeism and increased productivity among older workers. Barnes pointed out that if prevention were more widely adopted as a public policy goal, Europe could save billions annually.

*“ There’s evidence that immunisation is good. It’s also about understanding what the barriers are out there. At the moment in Europe, we know that countries spend less than 0.5% of their healthcare costs on vaccination.*

**Susie Barnes**, Senior Vice President for Global Medical Affairs and Vaccines at GSK

## Women's health and adult immunisation

A crucial aspect of the discussion was the need for a gender-sensitive approach to adult immunisation, particularly in the context of women's health. **Peggy Maguire**, Director General of the European Institute of Women's Health highlighted that women often face unique health challenges as they age, including higher incidences of comorbidities, which can leave them more vulnerable to preventable diseases. Maguire stressed the importance of gathering more data on the vaccination status and health needs of women across their life course, in order to design inclusive, targeted vaccination programs and messaging that resonates with women.

Maguire stressed that despite the vital role women play in healthcare – often both as caregivers and as decision-makers for their families – they are often overlooked in public health strategies. Women live longer, but frequently experience lower financial security and reduced access to healthcare, which can hinder their ability to receive necessary vaccinations. Maguire called for more targeted public health campaigns that address the specific health needs of women across their lifespan, from maternal vaccines during pregnancy to immunisations that protect against diseases like shingles and pneumonia in older age. By ensuring that women have equitable access to vaccines and are actively included in health promotion strategies, Europe can take a significant step forward in improving overall population health.

*“ Women are the main carers of children and ageing parents. They're an obvious group for public health experts to engage in meaningful dialogue about vaccination and inclusive targeting strategies involving women themselves.*

**Peggy Maguire**, Director General, European Institute of Women's Health

Overall, Maguire's comments underscored the importance of adopting a gender lens when developing adult immunisation strategies, in order to address the unique barriers and needs of women and promote more equitable health outcomes.

## Empowering healthcare professionals and engaging communities for adult vaccination

As the conversation shifted towards solutions, **Pierre van Damme**, Director of Vaccinopolis and Head of the Centre for the Evaluation of Vaccination at the University of Antwerp, stressed the importance of involving healthcare professionals and expanding their role in vaccination efforts. Healthcare professionals, especially general practitioners (GPs) and nurses, are often the most trusted sources of information for patients. Yet many professionals feel ill-equipped to address the nuances of adult immunisation. Van Damme argued that enabling healthcare

providers with more training and resources in vaccinology could empower them to confidently recommend and explain vaccines to their patients.

In addition to empowering healthcare professionals, the conversation also highlighted the importance of community engagement. There is a need to leverage digital tools and personalised outreach to remind and encourage adults, particularly the elderly and those with chronic conditions to stay up-to-date on recommended vaccinations.

**Pierre van Damme** referenced the effective use of mobile notifications and reminders during the COVID-19 pandemic as a model that should be implemented more broadly. By empowering healthcare providers to send tailored vaccination prompts directly to patients' phones, we could make it easier for adults to prioritise their immunisation needs.

*“ If elderly people ask their doctor, ‘Doctor, what would you do in my case?’, some would say, ‘I don’t know’, and that’s wrong. They should be able to say, ‘Look, you’re this age, you have that comorbidity. It’s clear you need extra protection.*

**Pierre van Damme**, Director of Vaccinopolis and Head of the Centre for the Evaluation of Vaccination at the University of Antwerp

Involvement of local pharmacies involvement could also increase access to vaccines, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pharmacies are often the first point of contact for citizens seeking healthcare advice, making them a key player in adult vaccination efforts. **Susie Barnes** noted that studies in the UK have shown that pharmacies help bridge healthcare equity gaps, particularly in lower-income communities. Pharmacies can provide easy access to vaccines, especially for individuals who might otherwise struggle with navigating traditional healthcare channels.

Pierre van Damme took the conversation further, arguing that Europe needs to develop clinics where citizens of all ages could receive regular preventive care, including vaccinations. This model would facilitate a more holistic approach to healthcare, one that is proactive rather than reactive.

## Towards a European Health Union: policy levers for adult immunisation

Perhaps the most ambitious discussion around policy was the concept of a European Health Union. Member of the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Public Health, Vytenis Andriukaitis argued on the need for stronger European cooperation on health issues, advocating for a shared competence on healthcare between the EU and its member states.

However, Andriukaitis was also realistic about the challenges of implementing such policies. While the EU made remarkable strides during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of vaccine coordination and procurement, much of this cooperation has since receded. Andriukaitis called for a revival of these cooperative efforts, urging policymakers to remember the lessons learned during the pandemic. Specifically, he advocated for harmonising national vaccination calendars and introducing more robust, pan-European mechanisms for vaccine procurement and distribution.

There were also broader concerns about vaccine hesitancy, a topic that elicited much debate among the panellists. While some pointed out the misinformation spread by anti-vaccine movements, others, including an intervention from an event participant, emphasised the need to differentiate between hardcore vaccine opponents and those who are simply hesitant or confused. They argued that many citizens have genuine questions about vaccines, but are not getting clear answers from their healthcare providers. This gap in communication needs to be closed if Europe is to reach its adult vaccination targets.

**“ *Misinformation, disinformation and fake news are affecting our efforts to provide real understanding about the necessity to have a life course immunisation* ”**

**Vytenis Andriukaitis**, Member of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Public Health and former European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety

## A call to action

As the event concluded, the sense of urgency was palpable. Europe's ageing population is not just a challenge, but also an opportunity to rethink healthcare priorities. Immunisation, particularly for adults, has the potential to prevent thousands of avoidable deaths each year, yet it remains an underutilised tool. Speakers across the board called for a multifaceted approach – one that includes better training for healthcare providers, more accessible vaccination points like pharmacies and stronger European cooperation on healthcare policy.

In the end, the discussion returned to a simple but powerful idea of prevention. If Europe can instil a culture of prevention within its healthcare systems, the benefits – both in terms of lives saved, improved quality of life and money spent – will be immense. Adult immunisation is a vital piece of this puzzle, but it requires concerted effort from governments, healthcare providers, and citizens alike. The road ahead is long, but the path is clear.

*“ I’m not fond of the term ‘healthy ageing’. I like healthy longevity, which is much more positive, optimistic. That’s really what we want. It’s to have a large proportion of our population to live longer and healthier.*

**Pierre van Damme**, Director of Vaccinopolis and Head of the Centre for the Evaluation of Vaccination at the University of Antwerp

## Recommendations

- **European healthcare systems should adopt a proactive approach by placing prevention, particularly adult vaccination, at the forefront of health policy.** By integrating vaccination programmes into wider healthy ageing initiatives, the focus shifts from treatment to prevention, which can reduce healthcare costs associated with preventable diseases. Vaccination not only protects against infectious diseases but also contributes to the overall wellbeing and longevity, especially for older adults who are more vulnerable. Emphasising prevention can alleviate the burden on hospitals and long-term care facilities, leading to healthier aging populations and economic savings across Europe’s health systems.
- **EU member states and public health authorities should enhance their data collection and monitoring systems to keep track of adult vaccination coverage.** The pandemic demonstrated the importance of robust data systems for tracking vaccination rates and public health trends. Accurate and real-time data can inform public health strategies, identify gaps in vaccination uptake, and ensure that underserved or high-risk populations are reached. Consistent monitoring can also help in evaluating the effectiveness of vaccination campaigns, driving continuous improvements in public health policies.
- **Government health authorities, pharmaceutical companies and research institutions should work together to accelerate the development and distribution of adult vaccines.** By fostering partnerships, these stakeholders can drive innovation in vaccine technologies and ensure that new vaccines reach the market more quickly. It is crucial that this collaboration prioritises equitable access and affordability, so that all population groups, regardless of income or geography, benefit from vaccination programs.
- **Public health authorities, pharmaceutical companies and research institutions should adopt a gender-responsive approach when developing and distributing adult vaccines.** Men and women may have different health vulnerabilities and needs, which must be considered in the design and implementation of vaccination strategies. By addressing these gender-specific health differences, stakeholders can ensure more effective vaccine coverage and improve health outcomes for all genders.

- **Public health authorities and healthcare organisations should empower healthcare professionals, including nurses, pharmacists and occupational health providers, to become champions for adult vaccination.** These professionals should be equipped to answer any questions patients may have, thereby combating vaccine hesitancy. Frontline healthcare providers play a pivotal role in educating patients about vaccinations and dispelling myths. By providing them with the necessary training and resources, they can advocate for adult vaccination, addressing patient concerns and correcting misinformation. Empowering these professionals to engage in informed conversations with patients will help tackle the growing challenge of vaccine hesitancy in Europe. Trustworthy and easily accessible information from healthcare providers can significantly increase vaccination uptake among adults.
- **Healthcare organisations should leverage digital tools, such as mobile apps, online health portals and SMS reminders to promote adult vaccinations.** Personalised outreach tailored to an individual's health history, age and risk factors should be used to remind adults when they are due for vaccinations, particularly the elderly and those with chronic conditions who are at higher risk. Utilising these tools should streamline communication, enhance information accessibility and provide convenient reminders that encourage higher vaccination rates across the population.
- **To promote consistency and efficiency in adult vaccination efforts, EU member states should harmonise vaccination schedules and standards.** Currently, disparities in how different countries approach adult vaccination can lead to confusion, gaps in coverage, and unequal access to vaccines. A harmonised approach should establish a unified standard for vaccinations, ensuring that all European citizens have access to the same level of protection, regardless of their location. This consistency should facilitate cross-border mobility and enhance public trust in EU-wide vaccination efforts.



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