

European Immunization Week: Challenges and Commitments



European Immunization Week (EIW), set for the final week of April, underscores the significance of vaccination for the health and well-being of Europeans and beyond. It advocates for vaccination as a crucial measure in disease prevention, emphasising its benefits across all age groups. EIW 2024, commemorated by the World Health Organization's European Region, focuses on the theme "Protecting Generations" to honour 50 years of the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI). Concurrently, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) releases data indicating a rise in cases of vaccine-preventable diseases like measles and pertussis following reduced vaccination rates during the COVID-19 pandemic.

50 Years of Evolution and Impact: EU's Expanded Programme on Immunisation

The Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) was launched in 1974 following the success of smallpox eradication, aiming to provide life-saving vaccines to all children worldwide. Over time, it has transformed into the Essential Programme on Immunisation, ensuring the availability of vaccines in every country. Vaccines are now recognised as safe, cost-effective, and highly successful in preventing diseases and saving lives. Initially targeting six childhood diseases, the EPI has expanded to include vaccines for older children, adolescents, and adults, totalling 13 recommended vaccines by the World Health Organization (WHO). These vaccines cover a broad spectrum of diseases, including COVID-19 for adults. As EPI celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2024, it remains dedicated to achieving universal access to vaccines and collaborating with other public health initiatives to control infectious diseases and promote better health worldwide.

Addressing Vaccine-Preventable Diseases in a Global Context

In the words of Dr Andrea Ammon, ECDC Director, "It is disheartening to see that despite decades of a well-documented safety and effectiveness track record of vaccines, countries in the EU/EEA and globally still face outbreaks of several vaccine-preventable diseases. Achieving and maintaining high vaccination uptake, disease surveillance and prompt response actions to control outbreaks remain the key actions against these diseases. Vaccines have protected many generations, and we should ensure that this continues to be the case".

Strategies to tackle Measles and Pertussis Resurgence

The European Union has witnessed a concerning uptick in measles cases starting in 2023, a trend that persists in several Member States. From March 2023 to the end of February 2024, over 5770 measles cases have been reported, with at least 5 fatalities. Infants below one-year-old face heightened risk due to their inability to receive vaccination, underscoring the necessity of community immunity. Measles, highly contagious, underscores the importance of achieving a vaccination coverage of at least 95% with two doses of measles-containing vaccine to disrupt transmission. Additionally, there has been a notable surge in pertussis cases since mid-2023 across various EU/EEA countries, with preliminary data suggesting a more than 10-fold increase compared to 2022 and 2021. Newborns and infants, unable to complete full vaccination schedules, are particularly susceptible to severe outcomes. Ensuring timely administration of all recommended pertussis-containing vaccines, including during pregnancy, is pivotal for protecting this vulnerable population.

Closing the Gap on Immunisation Disparities and Promoting Equity

Amid ongoing outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases, continuous efforts are imperative to pinpoint immunity gaps, especially among those who may have missed or delayed vaccinations. Vaccination schedules and booster doses, varying across EU/EEA countries, necessitate individuals to consult healthcare providers to ensure they are up-to-date with recommended vaccines. Furthermore, addressing vaccine inequity is crucial, particularly among vulnerable and underserved populations such as refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers. European Immunisation Week serves as a pivotal platform to underscore the importance of vaccination at all life stages, recognising vaccines as one of the most significant achievements in 20th-century public health.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) remains steadfast in its commitment to bolstering and enhancing national vaccination programs. This commitment prioritises vaccine quality, safety, and efficacy, ensuring equitable access for all individuals across Europe.

Source: [European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control](#)

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