

UEG Position Paper

Digestive cancers: Why actions are needed?

The paper gives an overview of the burden of digestive cancers within Europe and outlines activities to improve the current state of art.

Digestive cancers encompass the group of cancers that affect the digestive system. This includes, for instance, esophagus, stomach, pancreas, liver, bowel or colon. They affect both men and women and are the leading cause of cancer-related death in Europe. They are the most common type of cancer in Europe among men and the second most common in women after breast cancer.

Inequalities - Screening, access to treatment and health literacy

Being the most common type of digestive cancers, colorectal cancer is also the second most common cause of cancer-related death in Europe. Nonetheless, there is strong evidence to demonstrate that screening for colorectal cancer reduces incidence and mortality rates. Yet there are **vast inequalities in colorectal cancer screening** program design and participation across Europe ranging from 1% in Hungary to 73% in the Netherlands.¹

Other digestive cancers, like gastric and oesophageal cancers, although less frequent, also require our attention since they are **characterized by a particularly bad prognosis** (overall survival not exceeding 25 and 10%², respectively), while being potentially preventable (eradication of *Helicobacter pylori*, adapted screening, early detection).

Pancreatic cancer is the deadliest cancer, with a 5 years survival of less than 10% and no progress for almost 50 years. Moreover, by 2025, deaths from pancreatic cancer across Europe are projected to have increased by almost 50% since 2010. Yet **knowledge of the disease is alarmingly low**, with 64% of Europeans saying they know almost nothing about pancreatic cancer.³

UEG calls for:

- the implementation of standardised population-based screening programmes for colorectal cancer in all Member States and underlines the importance of screening programmes to improve sustainable health care systems
- regular updates of European colorectal cancer screening guidelines and screening progress reports every two years, which reflects the scientific evidence from current best practice
- equal access to prevention and treatment; improved quality and standards for cancer care across Europe
- screening programmes for the detection of other digestive cancers, like gastric and oesophageal cancers
- promotion of health literacy on the whole socio-economic scale

¹ UEG CRC Leaflet: <https://ueg.eu/files/779/67d96d458abdef21792e6d8e590244e7.pdf>

² ECIS: <https://ecis.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>

³ UEG Press release: <https://ueg.eu/a/203>

Research

Despite appalling patient outcomes, **pancreatic cancer receives less than 2% of all cancer research funding in Europe.**⁴ With increased research, we can enhance the understanding of this deleterious disease and, ultimately, save more lives.

Colorectal cancer also faces worrying trends, with incidence rates in adults aged 20-39 increasing by 6% every year between 2008 and 2016.⁵ Young-onset is more aggressive, more likely to be diagnosed at an advanced stage, and more likely to be fatal, compared to colorectal cancer diagnosed later in life.

UEG calls for:

- increased funding into the pancreatic cancer research (basic science and clinical studies)
- prioritisation of further research into robust biomarkers
- research to understand the causes of the increase of young-onset colorectal cancer

Lifestyles

It is now estimated that approximately half of all cancers are preventable, and thus through appropriate action, their burden could be reduced.

Diet is one of the most important factors in the development and prevention of cancer. A diet rich in fruit and vegetables can significantly reduce risk. Colorectal cancer risk increases by 28% for every 120g of red meat eaten per day⁶ while a high consumption of salt has been linked with stomach cancer, which claims the lives of almost 60,000 EU citizens annually.⁷

The European region has the highest level of alcohol consumption in the world. Alcohol abuse accounts for up to half of all liver cancer cases in Europe.⁸

UEG calls for:

- whole-of-society approach to transform the food systems: through establishing clear, scientific targets and limiting the consumption and production of unhealthy foods, reducing salt and sugar in processed foods
- comprehensive range of policies to limit availability, affordability and acceptability of fast foods (fiscal measures, marketing, labelling)
- ban on the industrial trans-fats, in alignment with the WHO 2023 trans-fat free target
- protection from excessive alcohol consumption, through prevention of aggressive marketing and delivering on a regulatory approach to labelling - to ensure that consumers are well-informed about what they put into their bodies.

⁴ UEG Press release: <https://ueg.eu/a/203>

⁵ UEG Press release: <https://ueg.eu/a/37>

⁶ NCBI (2015) Red Meat and Colorectal Cancer: <https://bit.ly/3kBMv85>

⁷ ECIS: <https://ecis.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>

⁸ UEG Report: <https://ueg.eu/files/352/371bce7dc83817b7893bcdeed13799b5.pdf>