

Commission takes further action to better protect workers against cancer-causing chemicals

The Commission proposes to limit workers' exposure to five cancer-causing chemicals, in addition to the 21 substances that have already been limited or proposed to be limited since the beginning of this mandate. Estimates show that today's proposal would improve working conditions for over 1,000,000 EU workers and prevent over 22,000 cases of work-related illness.

Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, Marianne **Thyssen**, said: *"Today, the Commission has taken another important step towards fighting work-related cancer and other relevant health problems on the work floor. We propose to limit workers' exposure to five additional cancer-causing chemicals. This will improve protection for over 1 million workers in Europe and help create a healthier and safer workplace, which is a core principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights."*

The Commission proposes to include new exposure limit values for five chemicals in the Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive. These limit values set a maximum concentration for the presence of a cancer-causing chemical in the workplace air. The following five carcinogens of high relevance for the protection of workers have been selected:

- Cadmium and its inorganic compounds;
- Beryllium and inorganic beryllium compounds;
- Arsenic acid and its salts, as well as inorganic arsenic compounds;
- Formaldehyde;
- 4,4'-Methylene-bis(2-chloroaniline) (MOCA).

The first three carcinogens listed above are extensively used in sectors as cadmium production and refining, nickel-cadmium battery manufacture, mechanical plating, zinc and copper smelting, foundries, glass, laboratories, electronics, chemicals, construction, healthcare, plastics and recycling.

Putting in place effective measures to prevent high exposures to the five substances and groups of substances under consideration will have a positive impact, even much broader than cancer prevention alone. Introducing these exposure limit values will not only lead to fewer cases of work-related

cancer, but also limit other important health problems caused by carcinogenic and mutagenic substances. For example, exposure to beryllium, in addition to lung cancer, also causes incurable chronic beryllium disease.

European limit values also promote consistency by contributing to a 'level playing field' for all businesses and a clear and common objective for employers, workers and enforcement authorities. The proposal therefore leads to a more efficient system of workers' health protection and improved fairness in the single market.

The proposal is based on scientific evidence and follows broad discussions with relevant stakeholders, in particular employers, workers and Member States' representatives.

Background

This Commission is committed to further strengthening workers' right to a high level of protection of their health and safety at work. The [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), which was jointly proclaimed by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission at the [Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth in Gothenburg in November 2017](#), recognises that workers' right to a healthy, safe, and well-adapted work environment is essential to the upward convergence towards better working and living conditions in the EU. Protection of workers' health, by continuously reducing exposures to carcinogenic and mutagenic substances in the workplace, is a concrete action taken by the Juncker Commission to deliver on this priority.

[Data show](#) that cancer is the first cause of work-related deaths. 52% of annual work-related deaths are due to cancer, compared to 24% due to circulatory illnesses and 2% due to injuries. Exposure to certain chemical agents at work can cause cancer. While cancer is a complex disease and certain causal factors are difficult to identify, it is clear that cancers caused by exposure to chemical substances in the workplace can be prevented by reducing or eliminating these exposures.

To ensure that workers are protected against such risks, in 2004, the EU adopted the Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive 2004/37/EC (CMD). This Directive sets out steps to be taken to eliminate or limit exposure to carcinogenic and mutagenic chemical agents and, as such, to help prevent occupational cancers and related diseases.

Scientific knowledge about carcinogenic or mutagenic chemicals is constantly evolving and technological progress enables improvements in protection of workers. To ensure that the mechanisms for protecting workers established in the CMD are as effective as possible and that up-to-date preventative measures are in place in all Member States, the Directive needs to be regularly revised. For this reason, the Commission has supported a continuous process of updating the CMD to keep abreast with the new scientific and technical developments, taking account of Social Partners' and Member States' views.

Two previous legislative amendments were proposed by the Commission to the

CMD, in [May 2016](#) and [January 2017](#), together identified limit values to 21 carcinogens. The first amendment was adopted as a [Directive \(EU\) 2017/2398](#) by the co-legislators at the end of 2017. The second proposal for legislative amendments is currently being discussed by legislators. In the EU, around 21 million workers are exposed to at least one of the chemical agents included in the three proposed legislative amendments.

For more information

[MEMO: Commission follows up on workers' protection from cancer-causing chemicals: frequently asked questions on the third revision of the Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive](#)

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