

## EPF Statement on the COVID-19 Pandemic

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On Wednesday 10 March, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the situation will worsen and that countries will need to “strike a fine balance between protecting health, minimizing economic and social disruption and respecting human rights.”<sup>1</sup>

The European Patients’ Forum calls on EU Member States to act rapidly and follow WHO’s advice to contain the spread of COVID-19 as far as possible, testing widely, and taking measures to ensure that health systems have sufficient capacity.

### **Ensure patients’ access to timely and safe treatment**

Patients with chronic conditions are at particular risk of serious illness and death from COVID-19 – data collected so far show that risks include being old and having diabetes, heart disease, immunosuppression, respiratory disease and hypertension. Persons with multiple conditions are at particular risk. This is a significant part of the population: across Europe, 150 million people live with a chronic condition, and some 50 million with multimorbidity.

We call for Member States to put in place effective strategies for protecting those who are most vulnerable. In particular, countries should give all possible support to their hospitals and healthcare staff.

The situation in Italy shows that patients’ lives are endangered when hospitals are overwhelmed. In addition to COVID-19, some patients with chronic conditions, for example cancer and other life-threatening diseases, as well as acute patients, will still need urgent medical care.

### **Solidarity needed**

Countries have divergent health system capacity, and some are struggling with finding the resources to deal with the pandemic. We call on the European Commission to take rapid action in concert and in solidarity to ensure the continuing supply of vital medicines, protective gear and equipment such as respiratory machines where they are needed.

EPF stands in solidarity with those affected by the crisis, in Europe and globally. Many of the patient organisations in our community are providing timely information updates for their communities regarding COVID-19. We recommend authorities to work with their country’s patient organisations to ensure effective flow of information and to answer their concerns.

Everyone can show solidarity. We all know someone who is vulnerable – a parent, a sibling, a friend. Healthy people can protect themselves and others by following the advice of public health authorities.<sup>2</sup> Behavioural changes made by individuals – such as hand hygiene, no handshakes, self-isolation, avoiding travel and social gatherings – help by slowing the spread of the virus and “flattening the epidemic curve”<sup>3</sup> – this is critical to ensure the healthcare system can continue to function.

The COVID-19 crisis is rapidly revealing gaps and weaknesses in our health systems, putting the cohesion and unity of the European Union to a test. It also shows that strengthening health systems is not only a national matter – it is an urgent European and global health policy priority.

### **ABOUT EPF:**

The European Patients’ Forum (EPF) is an umbrella membership-based organisation that works with patients’ groups in public health and health advocacy across Europe. Our 74+ members represent specific chronic disease groups at EU level or are national coalitions of patients. <https://www.eu-patient.eu/>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>

<sup>2</sup> For example: [https://twitter.com/EU\\_Health/status/1235962757767467008](https://twitter.com/EU_Health/status/1235962757767467008)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/11/flattening-curve-coronavirus/>