

# Call to Action: Raise Awareness, Relieve the Burden

Respiratory allergies in Europe are increasing and affect around 20%–30% of the European population. Allergies are a real and serious disease, they place a considerable burden on European societies, and on patients and their families. The European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients Associations (EFA) calls upon the European Union (EU) and Member States to take the necessary steps to develop a strategic, comprehensive and integrated approach to respiratory diseases with a focus on respiratory allergies that brings all initiatives and actions under one umbrella, and supports the launch and implementation of national programmes on respiratory allergies.

EFA calls upon European policy makers to coordinate actions to:

1. Increase the political recognition of respiratory allergies as a real and serious disease
2. Promote national programmes on respiratory allergies
3. Prioritize the management and control of respiratory allergies
4. Promote training in allergy for healthcare professionals to improve accurate and early diagnosis
5. Align healthcare and reimbursement policies, to support appropriate disease management
6. Improve indoor air quality

## 1. Increase the political recognition and awareness of respiratory allergies as a real and serious disease

Respiratory allergies in Europe affect around 20%-30% of the European population. Nevertheless, allergies, and in particular respiratory allergies such as allergic rhinitis (e.g. hay fever), are not considered real and serious diseases, and, as a result, they remain frequently underdiagnosed and undertreated despite the heavy burden they place on patients, their families and society as a whole.

***We call upon the European Union and Member States to recognize respiratory allergies as a serious disease and a real public health problem and to adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach to address these problems in order to improve the quality of life of patients, and decrease the social and economic burden of the disease.***

## 2. Promote national programmes on respiratory allergies

Awareness of respiratory allergies remains relatively low in Europe. Many healthcare professionals and patients consider respiratory allergies, particularly allergic rhinitis, a trivial condition. Patients do not understand what inflammation in allergy means and are often unaware of the implications accompanying the progression of allergies. National programmes on respiratory allergies that involve healthcare authorities, healthcare professionals, patient organizations and all relevant stakeholders are essential in achieving better awareness and control of these conditions.

***We call on the EU and Member States to implement large scale public health campaigns to increase awareness of allergies including respiratory allergies amongst the general public, general practitioners, and patients to prevent the exacerbation of the conditions and reduce the burden on society. These measures should aim at achieving equal access to treatment, preventive treatments, reimbursement and information and education programmes in particular for patients with moderate/severe conditions.***

## 3. Prioritize the management and control of respiratory allergies

Respiratory allergy is a complex condition that can have a severe impact on daily life. It can result in work and school day losses and in a reduction of productivity; loss of confidence and sometimes depression. Effective management of respiratory allergies is crucial in keeping control of the condition to avoid exacerbation; and ultimately to improve the quality of life of the patients. Too often patients tend to adapt to and to live with their symptoms. The lack of appropriate control may cause exacerbations that, in asthma, may even cause irreversible damage to the lungs (irreversible obstruction).

***We call upon the EU to adopt measures to establish European guidance on the appropriate management and control of respiratory allergies based on a multidisciplinary approach in order to avoid exacerbations.***

#### **4. Promote training in allergy for healthcare professionals to improve accurate and early diagnosis**

In most European countries there is a lack of allergologists and physicians with specific training in allergy. Allergology is not recognized as a specialization in many European countries. Respiratory allergies are often dealt with in primary care. This means that patients often receive a late diagnosis and not always the appropriate treatment in line with the most recent international evidence-based guidelines. Nurses and pharmacists also play an important role, particularly in promoting early diagnosis, in monitoring and managing patients with a mild condition and in recognizing the onset of more severe symptoms thereby preventing exacerbations.

***We call on the EU and Member States to ensure that allergology is included in the training of medical students and that dedicated training for physicians is available in all European countries. Dedicated training in allergies should also be provided to nurses and pharmacists.***

#### **5. Align healthcare and reimbursement policies, to support appropriate disease management**

Allergen specific immunotherapy seems to be the only treatment able to treat and modify the course of the respiratory allergy in selected patients today, and may reduce the risk of asthma in patients with allergic rhinoconjunctivitis. However, access to and reimbursement of allergen specific immunotherapy is difficult in most European countries.

***We call on the EU and Member States to improve access to preventive and/or disease modifying treatments.***

#### **6. Improve indoor air quality**

European Union governments and the EU pay less attention to indoor air quality than to outdoor air quality. Poor indoor air quality and cigarette smoke are risk factors for respiratory allergies. Exposure to a poor indoor environment (e.g. air pollution in dwellings) has been linked to asthma and allergy symptoms, lung cancer and other respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, and is a real health problem. In addition, poor air quality can trigger exacerbations and worsen the patient's conditions. Patients have the right to breathe freely, and should have access to safe environments, in particular indoors, such as schools, public buildings, hotels, etc.

***We call on the EU and Member States to ensure good indoor air quality, including measures to abolish smoking in both the work place and public places across Europe and a joint framework on healthy air indoors.***

***We call on the EU and Member States to develop EU guidelines for a healthier indoor environment including in schools and dwellings.***