

EUCIC - ESCMID statement on World Hand Hygiene Day 2026

On the occasion of World Hand Hygiene Day, EUCIC and ESCMID reaffirm that **hand hygiene remains the cornerstone of infection prevention and control (IPC)** and one of the most effective measures to protect patients, healthcare workers, and communities.

A public health imperative in the era of AMR

Healthcare-associated infections and antimicrobial resistance (AMR) represent a growing global crisis:

- Approximately **35,000 deaths annually** in the EU/EEA are attributable to antibiotic-resistant infections;
- Around **70% are healthcare-associated**;
- Without effective measures, deaths could rise dramatically by 2050.

Hand hygiene, particularly the use of alcohol-based hand rubs, is a **critical intervention to prevent transmission** and reduce this burden. Restricting access to ethanol-based hand rubs (EBHR) would have serious consequences for patient safety and public health.

A concerning decline in compliance

Following improvements observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, we now observe a **decline in hand hygiene compliance in several countries, including France and other European settings**. This trend is alarming and underscores the need for renewed commitment, sustained investment, and behavioural strategies to maintain high standards.

Ethanol-based hand rubs: essential, effective, and safe

EBHR remain the **gold standard for hand hygiene**. They are highly effective against a broad spectrum of pathogens, including non-enveloped viruses such as norovirus, rotavirus, and adenovirus.

In 2025, EUCIC supported the position presented by the VAH submission to the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) regarding ethanol use in hand hygiene. ESCMID fully aligns with this position.

Scientific evidence clearly demonstrates that:

- EBHR are indispensable for infection prevention in healthcare and community settings;
- Their use does **not pose carcinogenic, mutagenic, or reprotoxic (CMR) risks** when applied as intended;
- Their benefits in reducing healthcare-associated infections and transmission of pathogens **vastly outweigh any theoretical risks**.

This strong and joint effort from EUCIC and other IPC organisations led ECHA to postpone the classification of ethanol as a CMR substance, keeping alcohol hand rub as the main and most effective method for infection prevention.

Innovation: beyond technology

Significant innovations are emerging in hand hygiene, from wireless monitoring systems and artificial intelligence to virtual reality training and enhanced patient engagement. These tools offer new opportunities to improve compliance and awareness.

However, innovation must not be limited to technology. It must also transform **how we approach hand hygiene practices themselves**. Simplified, pragmatic approaches such as streamlined techniques (e.g., 3-step methods where appropriate) can improve adherence while maintaining efficacy. Innovation should ultimately serve usability, sustainability, and impact at the point of care.

Supporting global IPC leadership

EUCIC and ESCMID also express concern regarding recent reductions in resources and restructuring affecting the IPC programme at the World Health Organization.

IPC is a pillar of global health security, essential for:

- outbreak preparedness and response (e.g., Ebola, COVID-19),
- health system resilience,
- and protection of healthcare workers.

We emphasise the urgent need to:

- Restore and sustain dedicated IPC leadership and resources at WHO;
- Ensure implementation of the Global IPC Action Plan (2024–2030);
- Maintain strong coordination with global networks such as the Global Infection Prevention and Control Network (GIPCN).

Call to action

On this World Hand Hygiene Day, EUCIC and ESCMID call on policymakers, healthcare leaders, and professionals to:

- Reinforce hand hygiene as a **top patient safety priority**;
- Sustain access to effective tools, particularly ethanol-based hand rubs;
- Invest in both **technological and behavioural innovation**;
- Reverse declining compliance trends;
- Support strong global and national IPC leadership.

**Clean hands save lives: today, tomorrow
and in every healthcare setting.**