



Call for Affiliated Partners to the European Reference Networks (ERNs)

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

1. What are the European Reference Networks (ERNs)?

The European Reference Networks (ERNs) are virtual networks bringing together highly specialised healthcare providers across the European Union and Norway.

They aim to improve diagnosis, treatment and care for patients with rare, low-prevalence and complex diseases that require highly specialised healthcare, by pooling expertise and facilitating cross-border collaboration.

ERNs were established under Directive 2011/24/EU on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare.

2. What is an Affiliated Partner in the ERN system?

Definition: Affiliated Partners are part of the ERNs in the form of Associated National Centres, or Coordination Hubs, or Collaborative National Centres¹.

Purpose: for Member States which do not have any member within an ERN. The Affiliated Partner allows the Member State to participate in the ERN activity through healthcare providers that are designated as: Associated National Centres; or Coordination Hubs; or Collaborative National Centres².

3. What is an Associated National Centre?

Definition: healthcare provider, with some special expertise matching the global thematic domain of a given reference network, that concentrates primarily on the

¹ Article 1a(c) of Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2019/1269.

² Recital 14 of Commission Delegated Decision 2014/286/EU. Recital 7 of Commission Implementing Decision 2014/287/EU. Statement adopted by the ERN BoMS on affiliated partners, May 2016.

provision of healthcare directly related to the activities and services of this specific network, including any type of diagnostic contribution supporting this provision of healthcare³.

Minimum recommended criteria⁴ :

- General: Evidence of a clear and well-defined organization; Measures in place related to respect patients' rights and to ensure patient-centred quality care; Measures in place related to patient safety.
- Specific: Dedication, general knowledge of and some special expertise in the thematic area of the ERN; Availability of human resources and organization of care; Equipment and facilities; Processing of patient data, coding and participation in patient registries.

4. What is a National Coordination Hub?

Definition: any type of institution with the appropriate knowledge and the legal and organizational capacity to link the national healthcare system to a number or all European Reference Networks. National Coordination Hubs function as interfaces between the national healthcare system and those networks where a given Member State is neither represented by a full member nor by an Associated National Centre. National Coordination Hubs do not need any specific medical expertise or knowledge⁵ in rare diseases.

Minimum recommended criteria⁶ :

General: Evidence of a clear and well-defined organization; Listing of the different ERNs the coordination hub should be linked to; Description of the capacity and the ways to link the different ERNs with the national healthcare system, in particular to centres dealing with rare diseases.

5. Who designates an Affiliated Partner?

Affiliated Partners are designated by the national competent authority of the Member State, and their designation follows national procedures.

6. When are Affiliated Partners designated and what happens after designation?

³ [Statement](#) adopted by the BoMS on the definition and minimum recommended criteria [...], Nov 2017, p. 7.

⁴ [Statement](#) adopted by the BoMS on the definition and minimum recommended criteria [...], Nov 2017, pp. 8-11.

⁵ [Statement](#) adopted by the BoMS on the definition and minimum recommended criteria [...], Nov 2017, p. 12

⁶ [Statement](#) adopted by the BoMS on the definition and minimum recommended criteria [...], Nov 2017, p. 12.

See the 2026 AP Call text under point 6 ‘Application Procedure’.

7. What are the tasks, rights and obligations of the Affiliated Partners?

As recalled by the Board of Member States Statement of 10 October 2017⁷, “the Associated National Centres and Coordination Hubs should:

1. Support the ERN objectives established in Article 12 of Directive 2011/24/EU on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare.
2. Fulfil the Minimum Recommended Criteria.
3. Respect the rules of the Network to which the Affiliated Partner will be linked and participate and share the tasks and work related with the cooperation activities of the Network.
4. Act as a hub-node at national level in the area of expertise of the ERN to which the Affiliated partner is linked including the referral of patients to the ERN Clinical Patient Management System.
5. Contribute through their relationship with the ERNs to pool and disseminate expertise for the benefit of patients and Member States.
6. Follow the rules and strategies established in an ERN-Affiliated partner bilateral cooperation agreement that should describe how affiliated partners interact, participate and contribute to the specific ERN

8. How can a healthcare provider become an Affiliated Partner member of an ERN?

Becoming an Affiliated Partner member of an ERN is a structured process, coordinated at EU level and grounded in national endorsement, which starts when the European Commission launches a formal call for applications. Further information is available in the 2026 AP Call text.

9. When the next Call for Affiliated Partners will be launched?

The Call will be launched on 13 April 2026.

10. Which is the deadline for the submission of applications?

The deadline for submission of applications is 1 September 2026.

11. What are the documents that will support the Call?

The documents supporting the Call are the following:

⁷ [Statement](#) adopted by the BoMS on the definition and minimum recommended criteria [...], Nov 2017, pp. 12-13.

Annex 1	Technical Annex: Associated National Centres
Annex 2	Technical Annex: National Coordination Hubs
Annex 3	Template: National designation letter - Associated National Centre
Annex 4	Template: National designation letter - National Coordination Hub
Annex 5	Bilateral cooperation agreement ERN-Associated Partner
Annex 6	ERN Strategy for the Integration of Affiliated Partners
Annex 7	One-pager: key information regarding the application to the 2026 Call
Annex 8	Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

They will be made available on the DG SANTE website when the call is launched.

12. Are information sessions available prior to the Call launch?

To support applicants, the Commission will organise dedicated information sessions to provide detailed information regarding the call, and to illustrate the IT system that will be supporting the application process.

These sessions are planned for 30 March, 9 April and 20 April (this date only if needed). Participation is limited to the ERN Board of Member States and the ERNs.

13. Why are Affiliated Partners important?

Affiliated Partners play a key role in extending ERN expertise across the Union, facilitating access to specialised care, supporting cross-border knowledge exchange and clinical collaboration and strengthening the integration of ERNs into national health systems.

They contribute to the overarching objective of ensuring that no patient is left behind, regardless of where they live.

14. What is the legal basis that sets out how the ERNs are established and function?

The establishment and functioning of ERNs are based on:

- Directive 2011/24/EU on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare⁸

⁸ Directive 2011/24/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2011 on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare, OJ L 88, 4.4.2011, pp. 45–65. [Directive - 2011/24 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)

- Commission Delegated Decision 2014/286/EU setting out criteria and conditions that European Reference Networks and healthcare providers wishing to join a European Reference Network must fulfil⁹
- Commission Implementing Decision 2014/287/EU setting out criteria for establishing and evaluating European Reference Networks and their members¹⁰.
- Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2019/1269 amending Implementing Decision 2014/287/EU setting out criteria for establishing and evaluating European Reference Networks and their Members and for facilitating the exchange of information and expertise on establishing and evaluating such Networks¹¹

⁹ European Commission, Delegated Decision 2014/286/EU of 10 March 2014 setting out criteria and conditions that European Reference Networks and healthcare providers wishing to join a European Reference Network must fulfil, OJ L 147, 17.5.2014, pp. 71–78. [Delegated decision - 2014/286 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)

¹⁰ European Commission, Implementing Decision 2014/287/EU of 10 March 2014 setting out criteria for establishing and evaluating European Reference Networks and their Members and for facilitating the exchange of information and expertise on establishing and evaluating such Networks, OJ L 147, 17.05.2014, pp. 79–87. [Implementing decision - 2014/287 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)

¹¹ European Commission, Implementing Decision (EU) 2019/1269 of 26 July 2019 amending Implementing Decision 2014/287/EU setting out criteria for establishing and evaluating European Reference Networks and their Members and for facilitating the exchange of information and expertise on establishing and evaluating such Networks, OJ L 147, 17.05.2014, pp. 79–87. [Implementing Decision \(EU\) 2019/1269 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)