

Introduction

Diseases of the heart and circulatory system (cardiovascular diseases) are the main cause of death both globally as well as in Malta and accounted for 38% of all deaths locally in 2014. Deaths due to coronary heart disease (mainly heart attacks) accounted for 689 or 21.1% of all deaths, while other heart diseases (mainly heart failure) accounted for another 186 or 5.7% of all deaths.

Coronary heart disease is the most common cause of death in both males and females and accounts for 1 in 5 deaths in both genders.

Age at death

The average age at death from coronary heart disease is 75.6 years in males and 82 years in females. In 2014, coronary heart disease was the leading cause of premature deaths in males (deaths before the age of 70) accounting for 11.6% of premature deaths. In females it was the second leading cause of death premature deaths following breast cancer (7.4% and 6% respectively).

Local and international trends

While over the past 30 years the number of deaths from coronary heart disease has remained stable locally, the mortality rates have shown a downward trend due to an increase in the age at death as well as an actual decline in the rate.

Overall mortality rates from coronary heart disease for Malta are higher than the EU-28 average for both males and females. However the rates for those under the age of 65 years for Malta are comparable with the EU-28 average.

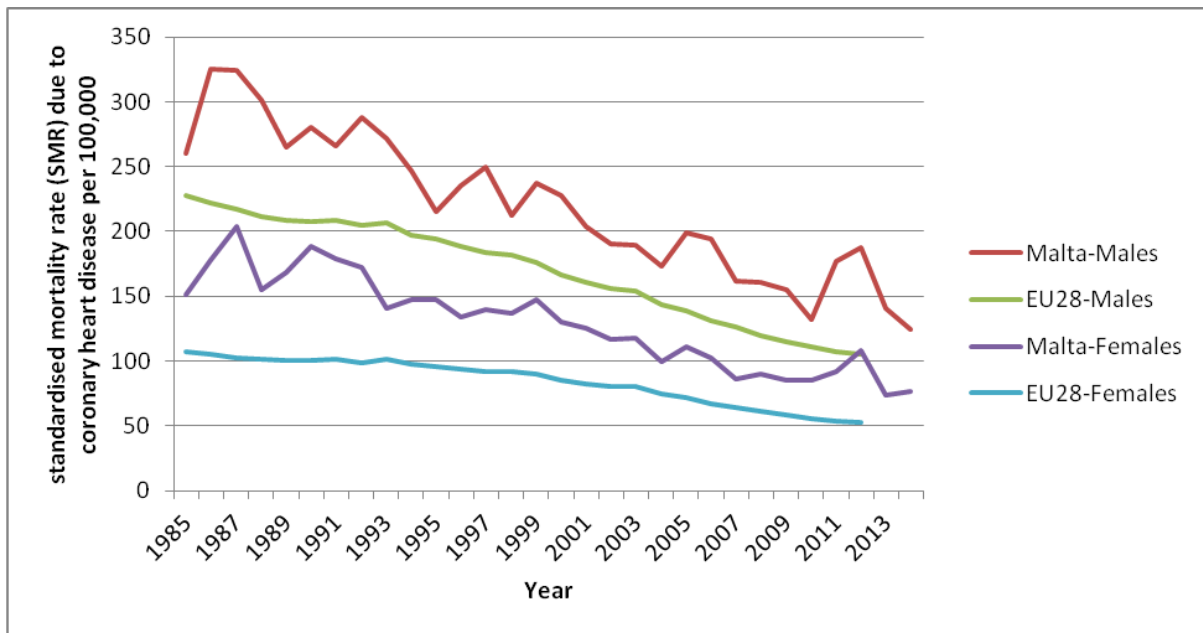


Figure 1: Trends in mortality from coronary heart disease for males and females in Malta compared to the European Union 1985-2014.

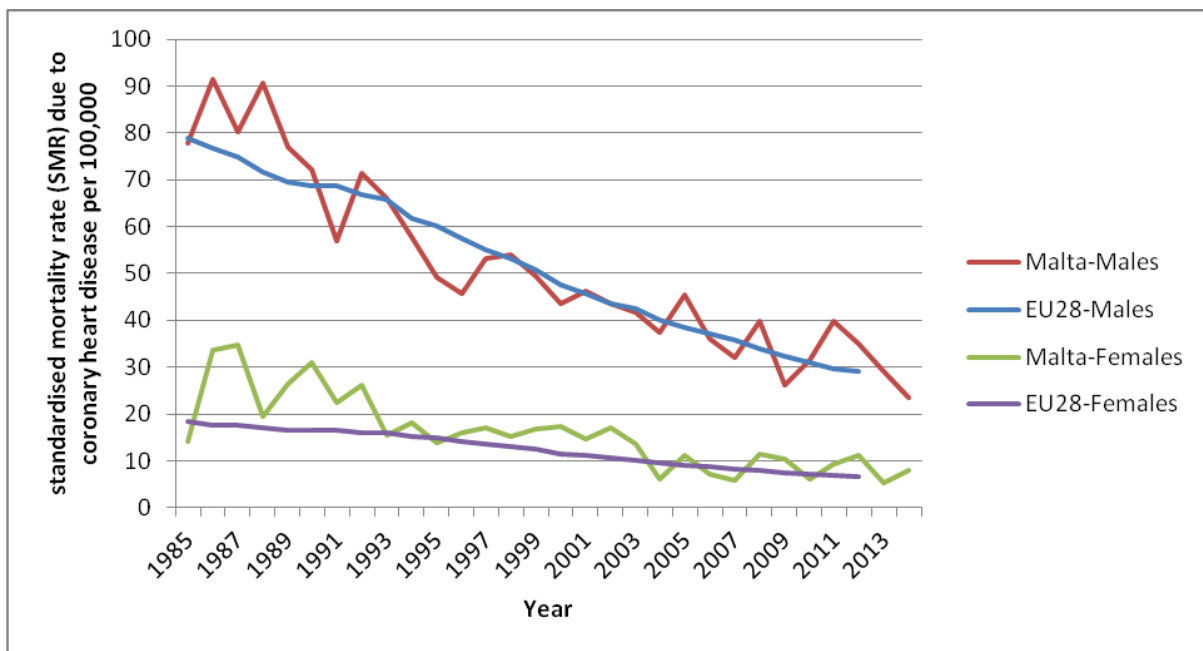


Figure 2: Trends in mortality from coronary heart disease under the age of 65 years for males and females in Malta compared to the European Union 1985-2014.

Lifestyle-related risk factors

There is strong evidence that coronary heart disease together with other non-communicable diseases are linked to several lifestyle-related key risk factors:

Smoking is a primary cause of preventable illness and premature deaths; According to the European Health Interview Survey 2008, 26% of males and 16% of females reported that

they smoked daily. Over the past 30 years smoking rates have decreased in males but increased in females. In adolescents, according to the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Drugs study of 2011 carried out by SEDQA, reported that 23% of boys and 20% of girls aged 15-16 years smoked during the last 30 days.

Obesity: Approximately 22% of the population is obese meaning they have a BMI that is greater than 30. A further 36% are overweight having a BMI that is greater than 25. When compared to EU member states Malta has the highest rate of obesity amongst males and the third highest rate amongst females. The picture amongst children is similarly negative. This is often linked to our unhealthy diet and lack of physical exercise.

Diabetes: Data from the self reported Health Interview Survey 2008 gave an estimate of 8% of the population self reporting diabetes. A smaller pilot examination survey in 2010, gave an estimated prevalence of 9.8% of the population.

Raised blood pressure: The overall self-reported prevalence of hypertension in Maltese women is 23% and 22% in men and is more prevalent with increasing age.

Raised blood cholesterol – Local data (HIS 2002) shows that the overall prevalence of self-reported raised blood cholesterol is 9%.

Conclusion

Despite the progress registered in Malta in coronary heart disease mortality, there is much room for improvement. Coronary heart disease together with other chronic non-communicable diseases such as cancer and diabetes, are linked by common modifiable risk factors. Lifestyle modifications such as healthy eating, increasing physical activity, never start/stop smoking, maintaining a healthy weight coupled with the ability to recognise disease at an early stage and take action are imperative for a healthy population.