

One World, One Home, One Heart - the theme for World Heart Day

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World Heart Day was created in 2000 to inform people around the world that heart disease and stroke are the world's leading cause of death, claiming 17.3 million lives each year. In Malta, ischemic heart disease is the leading cause of death accounting for 21% of all deaths. In 2010, there were 319 male deaths and 328 female deaths, a decrease of 47 male deaths and an increase of 19 female deaths over the previous year.

In partnership with WHO, the World Heart Federation organizes awareness events in more than 100 countries. These events vary from one country to another and include free health checks, organized walks, runs and fitness sessions, public talks, scientific forums, exhibitions, concerts, carnivals and sports tournaments. The World Heart Day takes place on 29 September each year. This year the theme is *One World, One Home, One Heart* focusing on women and children. Heart disease was traditionally associated with men and older persons. However we are seeing an increasing number of cases of ischaemic heart disease in women. In fact presently, half of deaths worldwide occur in women. One should also bear in mind that since women and mothers are usually the gatekeepers of the family's health, they have a significant influence to this respect. Furthermore, with risk factors being increasingly established during early childhood, this is putting the paediatric population at an increased risk of heart disease when they become adults.

Risk factors for heart disease include hypertension, hypercholesterolaemia and increased glucose levels, smoking, inadequate intake of fruit and vegetables, being or obese and physical inactivity. We know that at least 80% of premature deaths from heart disease and stroke could be avoided if the main risk factors, namely, tobacco, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity, are addressed.

Compared with nonsmokers, smoking is estimated to increase the risk of coronary heart disease by 2 to 4 times. Smoking causes reduced circulation by narrowing the arteries, increases peripheral vascular disease, and causes abdominal aortic aneurysm. Cessation can significantly reduce the risk of suffering from smoking-related diseases. The Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Directorate offers a free quitline service on 8007 3333 as well as free smoking cessation classes in health centers to help smokers quit. As a health professional you too can help by following the **ABC model** (Ask, Brief Advice, Cessation support).

Research has shown that the traditional Mediterranean diet reduces the risk of heart disease. In fact, a recent analysis of more than 1.5 million healthy adults demonstrated that following a Mediterranean diet was associated with a reduced risk of overall cardiovascular mortality.

The Mediterranean diet emphasizes:

- Eating primarily plant-based foods, such as fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes and nuts;
- Replacing butter with healthy fats such as olive oil and canola oil;

- Using herbs and spices instead of salt to flavour foods;
- Limiting red meat to no more than a few times a month;
- Eating fish and poultry at least twice a week.

Regular physical activity, fitness, and exercise are critically important for the health and well-being of people of all ages. Research has demonstrated that all individuals can benefit from regular physical activity, whether they participate in vigorous exercise or some type of moderate health-enhancing physical activity.

World Heart Day raises awareness amongst health professionals and the general public for the urgent need for everyone to take control of his heart health by living a healthy lifestyle with a healthy diet, increased physical activity and staying away from tobacco. Secondary prevention measures targeting risk factors including being overweight, obesity, hypertension, diabetes, high triglycerides and cholesterol and reducing stress couple up with the primary prevention measures. **S**

Bibliography

- WHO media centre website: http://www.who.int/mediacentre/events/annual/world_heart_day/en/index.html
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