



# Health statistics

## Atlas on mortality in the European Union

### Chapter 13 Breast cancers

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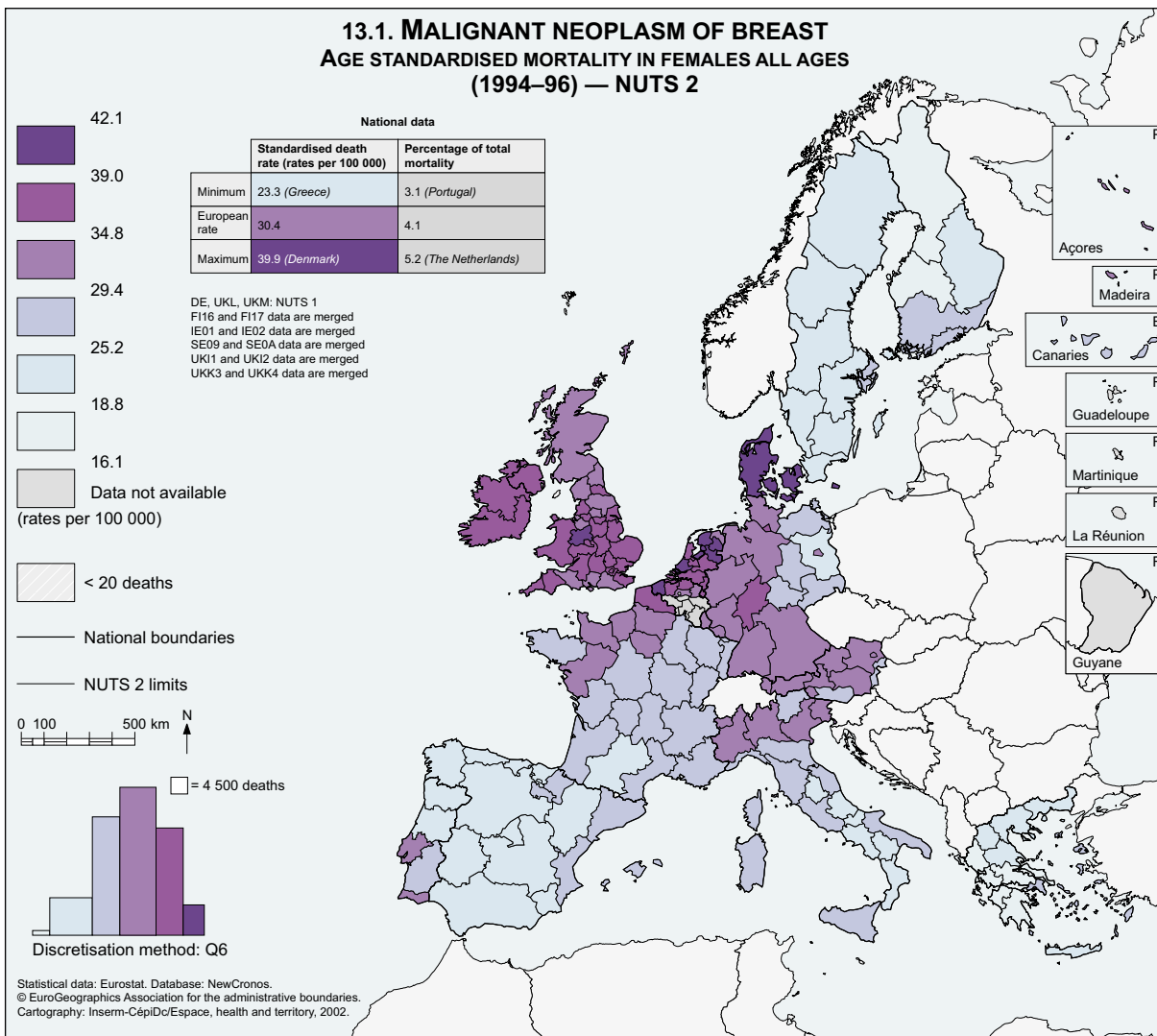
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**ATLAS — Contents**

1. Introduction.....	9
2. Methodology.....	11
3. General mortality.....	15
4. 'Premature' mortality.....	23
5. Mortality by age group.....	27
6. Typologies of mortality by age.....	43
7. Typologies of mortality by cause.....	49
8. Cardiovascular diseases.....	53
9. Respiratory diseases.....	59
10. Respiratory cancers.....	65
11. Intestinal cancers (colon, rectum and anus).....	71
12. Stomach cancers.....	75
<b>13. Breast cancers.....</b>	<b>79</b>
14. Cancers of the uterus.....	81
15. Prostate cancer.....	83
16. Cancer of the pancreas.....	85
17. Cancer of the bladder.....	89
18. Malignant melanoma of the skin.....	93
19. Mortality associated with alcoholism.....	97
20. Violent deaths.....	101
21. AIDS.....	111
Annex 1 — Standard European population.....	115
Annex 2 — Causes of death (European shortlist).....	116
Annex 3 — List of NUTS 2 regions.....	118



## 13. Breast cancers

Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer to affect women. It accounts for over 4 % of deaths among the female population of Europe and often affects young women: over half the number of deaths occur before 65 years. This pathology is the main cause of mortality in women aged between 45 and 64 (over 12 % of deaths).

Although there are clear-cut differences in the geographical pattern of female mortality from breast cancer, it should be noted that the differences in mortality across Europe are considerably less pronounced than other cancers, particularly cancers of the respiratory tract or the upper aerodigestive tract. The range of mortality compared with that of these cancers is small, at a ratio of 1 to 2.6.

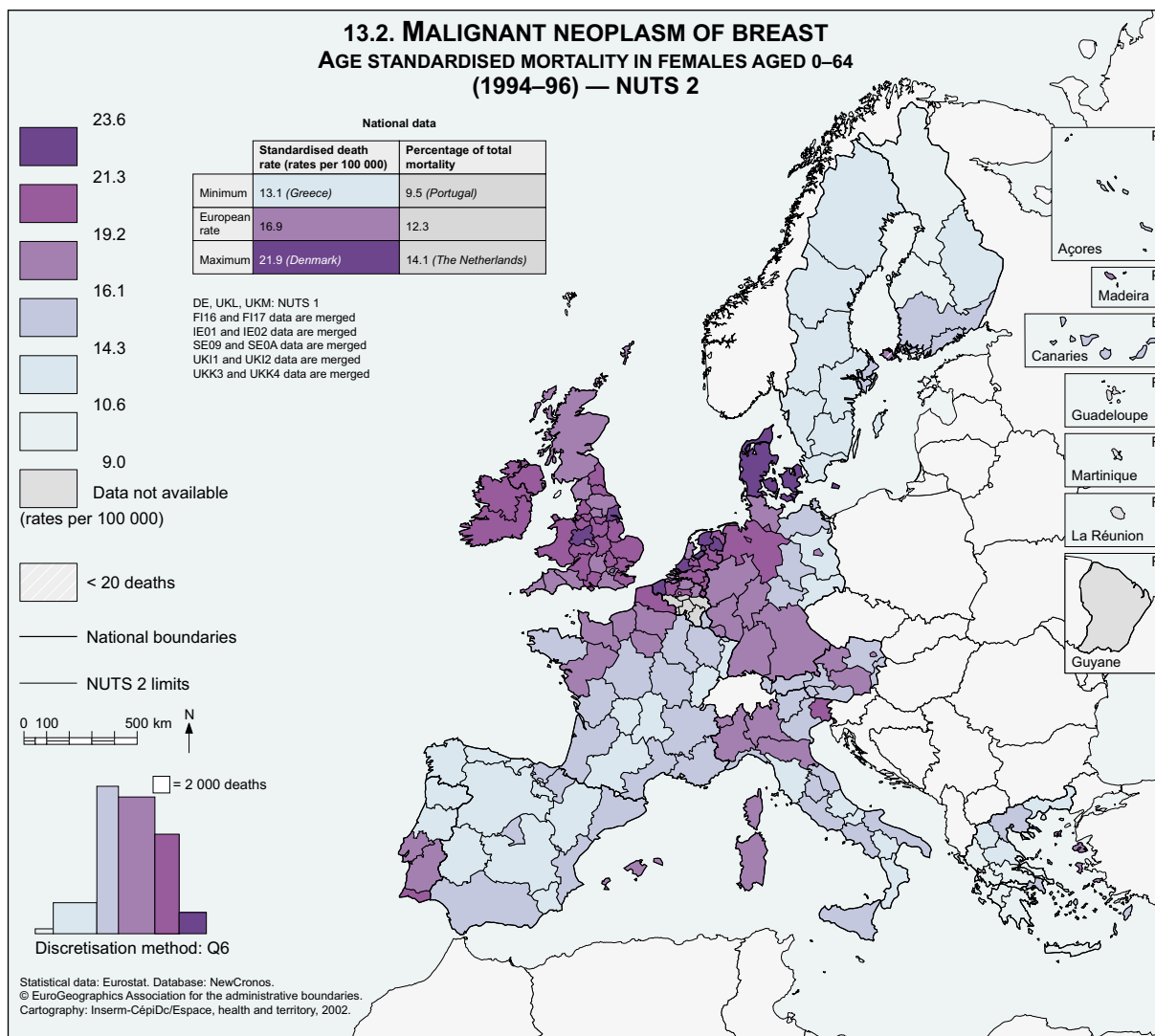
### A clear-cut geographical pattern

The regional maps showing the incidence of breast cancer, which is similar at all ages and before 65 years, reveals that the spatial distribution of rates is not random and that there are continuities.

A broad band of excess mortality comprises Denmark, with the highest rates in Europe, Belgium, western Germany, north-west France, northern Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria and the UK.

In the rest of the EU, the rates are considerably lower, particularly in Greece, Spain, Finland and Sweden.

In Portugal, there is a clear north/south divide, with the northern regions more favourably placed. The Mediterranean islands of Corsica, Sardinia, Sicily and the Balearics (but not the Greek islands) have



similar fairly high rates, so that they are not as well placed as their respective countries.

Apart from Germany, France, Italy and Portugal, where there are marked regional contrasts, the distribution of mortality from breast cancer is determined, on the whole, by national trends.

### Breast cancer is caused by a number of factors

A number of risk factors are recognised as conducive to the development of breast cancer, and the geographical distribution of these cancers probably reflects an uneven spatial distribution of these risk factors.

Hormonal factors are often mentioned. It is maintained that early menarche, late age at first birth;

nulliparity and late menopause increase the risk of breast cancer, while breastfeeding plays a protective role. Excessive consumption of fat is also said to increase the risk of cancer, while the consumption of fresh fruit and green vegetables is said to reduce it. Genetic factors are also claimed to increase the risk of cancer, although less frequently.

These factors may explain the variations in the incidence of cancer but not so much mortality itself, since there is a 10-year survival rate of approximately 50 % for breast cancer. However, the seriousness of the prognosis depends mainly on how early the diagnosis is made. The differences in mortality in the EU should thus be seen in the light of the specific national screening policies.