



HSA

An tÚdarás Sláinte agus Sábháilteachta
Health and Safety Authority



Farmers' Health and Wellbeing



A guide to staying healthy while farming



Plain English
Approved by NALA



Contents

About this guide	1
Physical activity – are you getting enough?	2
Healthy eating – fuel for life	4
Coping with stress – minding your mental health	6
Back pain – ouch!	8
Hearing loss – prevention is crucial	10
Skin problems – be sun smart!	12
Lung and breathing issues – reduce your exposure to dust and spores	14
Infections – your animals can make you sick.....	16
Farmer health information resources.....	18

About this guide

As a farmer, you care deeply for your land, your crops and your animals. Your ‘gut instinct’ about the health of your animals and the condition of your land is what keeps your farm productive. However, like many Irish farmers, you may overlook the most important element of good farming – your own health and wellbeing.

Farming is never a ‘nine-to-five’ job. It is often unpredictable, demanding and hazardous. Research on the health of Irish farmers shows that farmers are at high risk of:

- **Heart disease**
- **Stroke**
- **Overweight/obesity**
- **Back pain**
- **Stress**
- **Mental health issues**
- **Lung issues**
- **Hearing loss**
- **Skin problems and cancers**

These health issues can also increase your risk of a farming injury. By recognising health problems early and getting treatment, you may prevent them from getting worse.

This guide is about looking after yourself so you can continue to enjoy life and farming for a long time to come. It gives you simple tips to stay healthy and well such as being more physically active, eating a healthy diet, and minding your mental health. Small changes over time can make a big difference.

So, start **today!**

Ask yourself:	Yes	No
Do I get health issues checked at an early stage and visit my doctor before they become ‘too bad to ignore’?		
Do I go for an annual health check to measure my blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar levels?		

Please, visit your doctor if you feel unwell for any reason, including stress and anxiety. Tell your doctor what you do for a living and all your symptoms. Early diagnosis and treatment may prevent your condition from worsening and may even save your life.



Physical activity – are you getting enough?

Many people think farming is a very active occupation, but that is no longer the case thanks to modern machinery. While farmers are generally busy, you might not be as physically active as you think you are.

Did you know that 20% (1 in 5 cases) of heart disease and 10% (1 in 10 cases) of stroke is caused by lack of physical activity?

To stay healthy you should be active at a moderate intensity, for at least 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week. You will know you are moderately active if you are breathing faster than normal, your heartbeat is raised and you feel warmer.

Keep in mind that:

- Any exercise is better than none and all activity counts – walking (particularly brisk walking), cycling, swimming, gardening, dancing or whatever activity you enjoy most;
- The more exercise you do, the more you will feel the benefits;
- If you have not been very active until now, start small: begin with 10 minutes and gradually build this up to 30 minutes a day.

If you are not sure about your health or fitness level, talk to your GP before you start exercising. Stay safe!

Tips

- If 30 minutes of moderate activity a day is difficult for you, break it down into 3 blocks of 10 minutes. Just make sure the activity takes some effort and increases your heart rate.
- Drink plenty of water before, during and after your exercise to stay hydrated.
- Listen to your body. Stop your activity if you feel unwell, have pain or feel dizzy.
- Exercising can be a great way to socialise. Find an activity that suits you and try to find someone to exercise with. Perhaps join a local walking or running group, or your GAA club.
- Feeling tired after a long day of work? Going for a brisk walk, a swim or cycle will make you feel better and give you more energy than sitting on the sofa.
- If you make exercise part of your daily routine, it will be easier to keep it up.

Ask yourself:	Yes	No
Do I achieve 30 minutes of moderate physical activity at least five days a week?		
Do I feel the three signs of moderate intensity activity when I exercise? (Raised heart rate, increased breathing, feeling warmer)		



Healthy eating – fuel for life

Food is fuel for your body, but to make your body work properly it needs the right fuel. Research shows that many Irish farmers have a poor diet. They snack daily on foods high in salt or sugar, eat too much meat and don't eat nearly enough fruit and vegetables¹. Could this be you?

Healthy eating is crucial to improve your overall health, reduce your cholesterol levels and blood pressure, and keep your heart healthy.

A healthy diet starts with:

- Eating more vegetables, fruit and salad – up to seven servings a day;
- Limiting your intake of foods high in fat, sugar or salt, including fizzy drinks;
- Watching your portion size.

Tips

- **Drink water:** It is easy to mistake thirst for hunger, meaning you might reach for food or snacks when what your body really needs is fluid. Always bring plenty of water with you wherever you're going or whatever you're doing and make sure to take breaks and drink it. Aim to drink 8 glasses of water a day.
- **Snack smart:** Farmers are on the move all the time and it's easy to reach for an unhealthy snack to keep yourself going until your next meal. Make sure to bring some healthy snacks with you such as fruit or unsalted nuts. These will fuel your body with a nourishing choice until your next meal and prevent you craving unhealthy (sweet, salty or fatty) snacks.
- **Eat more fibre:** Only one in every ten people in Ireland eats enough fibre. In other words, nine out of 10 people don't. Fibre fills us up, keeps our bowels moving normally and even helps to reduce cholesterol. Aim to have 5-7 portions of fruit and vegetables every day. Eat wholegrain versions of cereals, breads, pasta and rice, and keep the skins on potatoes. Add beans, peas or lentils to your dinner.
- **Avoid excess alcohol:** Alcohol can have a negative effect on our physical and mental health. It can disturb your sleep, leaving you feeling tired and dehydrated the next day, which can affect the food choices you make. Visit www.askaboutalcohol.ie to find out more.

Ask yourself:	Yes	No
Do I eat at least 5 to 7 portions of fruit, vegetables or salad every day? (A portion is about a handful).		
Do I try to avoid snacking on foods and drinks high in fat, sugar or salt, such as chocolate, crisps, biscuits, cakes, pastries, sugary drinks, chips, kebabs, creamy curries, fried chicken or burgers?		



Coping with stress – minding your mental health

Even though you love farming and may not want to do anything else, you may still be feeling stressed. Not only is stress a risk factor for heart disease, it is also linked to higher levels of farm injuries. Most farmers work better when they are not stressed so it is important to manage your stress to stay healthy and safe on the farm.

Stress is described as ‘a feeling of being overwhelmed, worried or anxious’. It is completely normal to feel this now and again, but feeling stressed regularly can affect your health and wellbeing. For example, stress can cause headaches, stomach aches and worry, and it can affect your ability to concentrate.

Feeling stressed influences your thinking and problem-solving, reducing your ability to think clearly and calmly. It is not always easy to recognise stress or admit to feeling stressed. But remember: ‘It is OK to say you are not OK’!



Coping with stress and minding your mental health starts with:

- Taking time out if you feel overwhelmed;
- Staying connected with others but disconnecting from your source of stress;
- Practising good self-care by healthy eating, being active, getting a good night's sleep and minimising your alcohol intake;
- Talking to someone and sharing the burden to find ways to deal with the stress, both in the short term and longer term.

Many of us withdraw from social contact when we feel stressed, but this is not a good idea. Closing in on ourselves can make it harder to cope because we have no-one to share our worries with or get support from. If you are struggling, look for help. It is important to talk to someone you trust. Contact your GP or the Samaritans on 116 123. You can also find help online, for example at www.yourmentalhealth.ie. If you – or others around you – need support with feelings of depression, self-harm or suicidal thoughts, you can also contact Pieta House on 1800 247 247.

Tips

- Watch out for poor sleep, angry outbursts or being short-tempered which can isolate you from much needed supports.
- Identify and write down what is making you feel stressed during the day.
- Try to plan and prioritise your work. Review how you organise your time. Rank tasks in order of importance, make lists and reward yourself for completing them.
- Take time to relax or do something you enjoy such as meeting a friend or neighbouring farmer, going to a match or taking exercise.
- Practise relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises or simply enjoying the landscape.

YourMentalHealth.ie or Mentalhealthireland.ie offer support and resources to help deal with stress, anxiety and isolation.

Ask yourself:	Yes	No
Do I recognise the signs of stress?		
Do I know how to 'deal' with stress and look after myself?		
Do I know where to go for support if stress affects my wellbeing?		



Back pain – ouch!

Back pain is common among farmers. One in two farmers have suffered from back problems at some time in their life². Back pain can be very painful and can affect both your health and how you run the farm.

Back injury and other musculoskeletal disorders (problems affecting bones, muscles and joints) account for one third of all reported injuries at work. In general, they result from exposure to manual handling risk factors. These risk factors include lifting heavy loads, awkward postures, lifting loads to a height or to ground level, repetitive movements and poor workplace set up.

Being physically active outside of farm work will help to improve your strength and flexibility. However, you should also review your work practices and look at ways to reduce your risk by changing the way work is planned and organised and using mechanical aids.

Pain management and specific exercises will help existing back pain. Don't 'treat it yourself' though. Talk to your GP or get advice from a qualified health professional, such as a chartered physiotherapist.

Remember:

- Lifting a heavy load can result in a back injury for life.
- Exposure to the manual handling risk factors listed above can damage your back over time.

Tips

- Assess and organise your work to avoid or reduce exposure to manual handling risk factors.
- Change the way loads are stored to avoid lifting loads above your head. Try to store loads between knee and elbow height where possible.
- Use work platforms or benches to store materials.
- Use mechanical aids for lifting and moving loads.
- Fit wheels to heavy loads, such as gates.
- Take time to plan each lifting activity. Get help if you need it.
- Try to vary work activities and allow for recovery periods when doing physical work.
- Warm up your muscles before any lifting or manual farm work.
- When planning to lift objects, assess the load weight and size before lifting. Keep your back straight, keep the load close to your body, bend your knees and lift using your thigh muscles, not your back muscles. Don't lift and twist your back at the same time.
- Make sure you have good lighting and space to carry out your work.
- Use attachments on tractors and other handling aids, as needed.
- Use automatic hitching in place of three-point linkage systems.
- Make sure you have good seating in tractors and other vehicles.

Ask yourself:	Yes	No
Do I plan work activities to include the use of mechanical aids?		
Do I organise the storage of materials to prevent lifting loads above head height?		
Do I make sure that I do not try to lift a very heavy load on my own?		



Hearing loss – prevention is crucial

Hearing in healthy adults stays ‘normal’ up to about age 60, but farmers’ hearing is often damaged at a much earlier age. Research shows that 25% of farmers (1 in 4) at age 30 and 50% (half) of farmers at age 50 have hearing loss. In addition, around 70% (7 in 10) teenagers living on farms show early signs of ‘noise-induced’ hearing loss³.

On the farm, tractors, machinery, power tools, and livestock all create a ‘noisy’ working environment. Exposure to sounds louder than 85 decibels (dB)A over extended periods of time can cause permanent hearing loss. To give an example: a quad bike engine produces 86 (dB)A, an air compressor 80 (dB)A and squealing pigs 100 (dB)A.

As a general rule, if noise makes it difficult for you to hear someone two metres away talking in a normal voice, that noise is at a damaging level. Hearing loss is permanent so it is important to prevent it.

Tips

- Consider the noise levels of machinery before buying.
- Keep doors and windows of tractors and machinery closed while operating them. Keep the seals on doors and windows of tractors and machinery in good condition.
- Maintain tractors and other machinery, including exhaust systems, properly.
- Design feeding systems and work in animal and poultry housing to keep noise levels as low as possible.
- Where noise cannot be eliminated, stay away and keep others out of the area.
- If noise levels would make it difficult to communicate with someone less than two metres away, wear hearing protection such as ear plugs or ear muffs.
- Where noise levels are very high, for example if using a chainsaw or angle grinder, consider a combination of ear plugs with ear muffs.

Go for a hearing test if you:

- find that background noises make it difficult to hear conversations;
- often have to turn up the TV or radio;
- have to frequently ask others to repeat what they just said;
- have a ‘ringing’ sound in your ears.

Ask yourself:	Yes	No
Do I wear hearing protection when working with noisy machinery or in noisy settings?		
Do I have my hearing checked regularly (at least once a year if I'm over 50)?		



Skin problems – be sun smart!

Farmers are exposed to damaging sun light (ultraviolet (UV) rays), chemicals and diseases passed from animals. They have four times the risk of developing skin disease compared with other occupation groups⁴. In Ireland, men are more likely than women to get skin cancer (melanoma) and deaths from melanoma are higher among farmers than ‘indoor’ workers. According to the Irish Cancer Society, the risk of skin cancer is three times higher if you get burned once every two years.



Other common skin diseases among farmers are eczema, contact dermatitis, skin allergies and infections, often caused by contact with chemicals and pesticides on the farm. Signs of skin damage include dryness, cracking, irritation, itchiness, redness, inflammation and abnormal lumps or growths. Taking care of your skin and avoiding cuts and other skin damage are ways to prevent skin diseases.

Your skin is the largest organ of your body and, when intact and healthy, will:

- protect your body from harmful chemicals and pesticides;
- keep moisture in and infections out;
- maintain your body temperature.

Tips

- Be sun smart. Make sure you wear sunscreen especially between April and September, even when it is cloudy. Wear long trousers, long-sleeved shirts and a broad-brimmed hat to protect yourself from the sun.
- Read and follow directions on product labels, such as pesticides, veterinary and chemical products. Wear the recommended PPE (protective clothing).
- Wash your hands after working with chemicals and pesticides and make sure you dry them thoroughly.
- Wear gloves to protect your hands or use barriers creams.
- Cover skin cracks, cuts and grazes with waterproof dressings.

Ask yourself:	Yes	No
Do I wear sunscreen – even when it is cloudy?		
Do I read and follow advice on product labels?		
Do I prevent cuts and grazes by wearing gloves?		



Lung and breathing issues – reduce your exposure to dust and spores

Farmers are at high risk for developing respiratory (lung) disease. About 60% (6 in 10) of non-smoking Irish farmers report having some lung or breathing issues⁵. Dust and spores (from mould) can cause severe illness. Sources of dust and spores include mouldy hay, straw or grain, compost used in mushroom growing, poultry feathers and poultry droppings, and dust in intensive livestock houses.

Exposure to dust and spores can lead to short and long-term complaints such as:

- short-term: irritation, bronchitis and breathlessness;
- long-term: asthma, chronic bronchitis, shortness of breath, weight loss, ‘farmers’ lung’ and sensitisation.

Sensitisation is serious and brings on the symptoms listed above even from small exposures to dust or spores. Be extra careful in winter and early spring when cattle are housed and you may be handling hay and grains indoors.

Tips

- If you’re a smoker, take steps to quit. (See HSE QUIT service: Quit smoking - HSE. ie)
- Prevent hay, straw or other materials from becoming mouldy.
- Wear a mask when working with mouldy silage, hay, straw or grains.
- Use machinery to move mouldy materials outside.
- If sweeping in dry conditions, wet down surfaces to avoid raising dust.
- Keep dust to a minimum, ventilate livestock housing, stables and barns, and work outside where possible.
- Use mechanical aids such as fans and filters to remove air pollutants.

Ask yourself:	Yes	No
Do I wear a mask when working with mouldy or dusty materials?		
Do I visit my GP if I experience breathing issues?		



Infections – your animals can make you sick

Although you take good care of your animals, did you know that you can get infections from seemingly healthy animals? Irish research found that 90% (9 in 10) of farmers did not know that healthy animals could be a source of infections⁶.

Zoonosis is a disease which is passed from animals to humans. Bacteria, fungi, parasites and viruses can cause illness when breathed in, swallowed or enter the body through cuts or grazes.

Examples of these infections are:

Weil's disease: this is a serious disease, mostly carried by rats and cattle. You can get sick when you come in contact with contaminated urine, water or milk. Generally, the disease enters through cuts or grazes or by mouth. Often, animals with Weil's disease appear healthy. If you catch Weil's disease, you could have fever, headache, nausea, sore muscles and joints, and red eyes. Please contact your doctor if you think you might have Weil's disease.

Lyme disease: this is carried by ticks. It can cause severe complaints including a circular skin rash, headache, tiredness and low mood (depression). Ticks can be found in low vegetation, wetlands, high grass and trees.

Orf: this is a viral condition that can spread from sheep or goats to humans. It causes small, red itchy lumps that go on to form blisters, often on the fingers, forearms or face. Other symptoms are fever and tiredness.

Other examples of infections include Bovine TB, Brucellosis and E.coli.

Tips

- Take care of your skin and prevent cuts and grazes. If you have a cut or graze, clean it properly and cover it with a waterproof plaster.
- Wear protective gloves when handling cattle. If you suspect your animals have a disease, wear a mask.
- Always wash your hands with water and soap after handling animals and dry your hands thoroughly.
- Keep your sheds as clean as possible.

Ask yourself:	Yes	No
Do I protect myself from infection by preventing or taking care of cuts and grazes?		
Do I visit my GP when I get bitten by an animal or when I feel unwell after handling an animal?		

Farmer health information resources:

www.irishheart.ie tells you how you can improve your heart health with a healthy diet and other heart health-related information

www.safefood.net for healthy recipes and other facts on healthy eating

www.YourMentalHealth.ie and www.Mentalhealthireland.ie offer support and information to help you deal with stress, anxiety and isolation

www.hsa.ie for information on farmers' health including hearing loss, lung and breathing issues

www.farmerhealth.org.au is an international website with information specifically for farmers on how to stay healthy, including information on hearing loss and skin protection

www.cancer.ie/sunsmart has advice for farmers on preventing sun burn and melanoma

Research References

1. van Doorn D, Richardson N, Storey A, et al. Investigating the Dietary Habits of Male Irish Farmers to Prevent Mortality and Morbidity. *Safety*. 2021;7(3):54.
2. Osborne A, Blake C, Fullen BM, et al. Prevalence of musculoskeletal disorders among farmers: a systematic review. *American journal of industrial medicine*. 2012;55(2):143-158.
3. Ehlers JJ, Graydon PS. Noise-induced hearing loss in agriculture: Creating partnerships to overcome barriers and educate the community on prevention. *Noise and health*. 2011;13(51):142.
4. Spiewak R. Farmers and farmworkers. *Kanerva's occupational dermatology*. 2020:1929-1946.
5. Cushen B, Sulaiman I, Donoghue N, et al. High prevalence of obstructive lung disease in non-smoking farmers: The Irish farmers lung health study. *Respiratory Medicine*. 2016;115:13-19.
6. Mahon MM, Sheehan MC, Kelleher PF, Johnson AJ, Doyle SM. An assessment of Irish farmers' knowledge of the risk of spread of infection from animals to humans and their transmission prevention practices. *Epidemiology and Infection*. 2017;145(12):2424-2435.

Acknowledgements

This leaflet was developed by the Health and Vulnerable Persons Working Group of the Farm Safety Partnership.

The content of this booklet is adapted from information from:

- the Irish Heart Foundation (www.irishheart.ie),
- the HSE (www.HSE.ie),
- the National Centre for Men's Health at South East Technical University guide 'Staying Fit for Farming' (www.hsa.ie/eng/Publications_and_Forms/Publications/Agriculture_and_Forestry/Staying_Fit_For_Farming.pdf), and
- Teagasc's guide 'Coping with the pressures of farming' (www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2018/Coping-with-the-pressures-of-farming.pdf).

You can find 'Staying Fit for Farming' on www.hsa.ie and 'Coping with the pressures of farming' on www.mentalhealthireland.ie.





Supported by

**An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Bia agus Mara**
Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine

HSA

An tÚdarás Sláinte agus Sábháilteachta
Health and Safety Authority