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

Farmer Health Check Programme

INFORMATION PACK





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Foreword

As a farmer and President of the Irish Farmers' Association, I'm very pleased to introduce this information pack as part of the 'Farmer Health Check initiative, which is co-ordinated by IFA's Farm Family committee and our partners Croi and partially funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. This pack is designed to give farmers practical advice and support to take better care of both their physical and mental health.

Farming is more than just a job—it's a lifestyle, and with that comes its own set of demands. Often, the focus is on the health of our livestock and land rather than on our own health and wellbeing. This pack is a reminder that looking after ourselves is just as important for running a successful farm as anything else.

Inside, you'll find useful tips on nutrition, sun safety, managing stress, and mental health. It also covers critical topics like heart health, stroke prevention, reducing cancer risk, quitting smoking, and cutting back on alcohol.

The pack doesn't shy away from tough subjects either, like mental health struggles or addiction, which are real concerns for many in rural Ireland. It's important to know that help is always available, whether for yourself or someone you care about.

I encourage you to look through this pack. The information isn't just for you – it's for all your family. By prioritising your health, you're not only looking out for your own future, but ensuring you can continue to care for your farm and loved ones for years to come.

Take this chance to learn, make small but meaningful changes, and reach out for support when needed. There are many organisations, including IFA, that understand the pressures we face as farmers and are ready to help.

Best regards

Francie Gorman
IFA President





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Why Your Health is Essential for a Successful Farm Business

Your health is the cornerstone of your business.

The physical and mental demands of farming require strength, stamina, and resilience, but all too often, your health takes a back seat to the day-to-day running of the farm.

However, if you want to be better equipped to make sound decisions, manage stress, and navigate the challenges that farming presents, then making your physical and mental health a priority is essential.

Physical health is directly linked to the ability to manage a heavy workload. Injuries, chronic pain and illnesses can lead to reduced productivity, longer recovery times and increased reliance on outside labour. This can be costly and hard to come by.

Prioritising health through proper nutrition, regular exercise, and preventive medical care is more likely to avoid these setbacks, ensuring that you can maintain the physical and emotional endurance needed to run your farm business.

Mental health is equally important. Farming is stressful for all sorts of reasons including unpredictable factors like weather, market fluctuations, and animal health issues. Poor mental health can lead to burnout, poor decision-making, increased farm accidents, and strained relationships, all of which can negatively impact farm operations – or stop you being able to farm altogether.

The success of the farm is fundamentally linked to the health of the person running it. By prioritising health—both physical and mental—you can ensure the longevity and prosperity of yourself AND your farm business.



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Cardiovascular Health and Stroke Awareness

Cardiovascular health and stroke prevention are critical for farmers, whose physically demanding lifestyle may not always protect them from the risks of heart disease and stroke.

According to the Health Service Executive (HSE) and Croí, the Irish heart and stroke charity, adopting heart-healthy habits can significantly reduce the risk of cardiovascular problems, which are leading causes of illness and death in Ireland.

Cardiovascular Health

Cardiovascular diseases (CVD), such as heart attacks and stroke, often result from high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking, poor diet, and lack of physical activity.

While farming involves hard work, the repetitive nature of farm tasks may not provide the cardiovascular benefits that come from consistent aerobic exercise. To protect heart health, it's essential for farmers to engage in regular physical activities such as brisk walking or hiking, cycling, or swimming, as well as weight focused exercises like strength training, which improve heart function, lower blood pressure, and strengthen the cardiovascular system.

A balanced diet is also key to heart health. The HSE and Croí recommend a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and healthy fats like those found in olive oil and fish. Reducing salt, saturated fats, and processed foods can lower cholesterol and blood pressure, helping to maintain a healthy heart.

Regular health checks to monitor blood pressure and cholesterol levels are vital in catching early signs of cardiovascular issues, allowing for timely treatment or lifestyle changes.

Signs that you may be having issues with your heart include:

1 Chest Pain or Discomfort: A feeling of pressure, tightness, or squeezing in your chest is a common sign of a heart attack. It may spread to your arms, neck, jaw, or back.

What to do: Call 112 or 999 immediately for emergency help.

2 Shortness of Breath: Difficulty breathing, especially without exertion, could be a warning sign of heart problems.

What to do: Stop any activity and seek medical attention right away if it occurs suddenly.

3 Light-headedness or Dizziness: Feeling faint, dizzy, or weak could indicate a lack of blood flow to the brain caused by heart issues.

What to do: Sit or lie down and contact a healthcare provider urgently.

♥ **Nausea or Cold Sweats:** Unexplained nausea, vomiting, or sweating that doesn't seem related to other causes may signal a heart attack.

What to do: Call emergency services immediately, especially if combined with other symptoms.

4 Unusual Fatigue: Extreme tiredness or weakness without a clear reason can be a sign of heart problems, particularly in women.

What to do: Consult your doctor as soon as possible to assess your heart health.

In all cases, it's crucial to act quickly and seek emergency medical help if you suspect a heart attack. Early treatment can save lives.

Stroke Prevention

Strokes occur when the blood supply to part of the brain is cut off, often due to a blood clot or bleeding in the brain. The risk factors for stroke are like those for heart disease, including high blood pressure, smoking, obesity, and excessive alcohol consumption.

You can take practical steps to reduce these risks by quitting smoking, moderating alcohol intake, and maintaining a healthy weight.

Recognising the signs of a stroke early is crucial for preventing long-term damage. The HSE advises using the FAST test:

♥ **Face:** Check if one side of the face droops.

♥ **Arms:** See if the person can raise both arms.

♥ **Speech:** Listen for slurred or strange speech.

♥ **Time:** If any of these signs are present, act quickly and call emergency services.

Acting quickly can significantly improve the chances of recovery from a stroke. You should also be aware of other symptoms like sudden weakness, numbness in the limbs, or difficulty understanding speech, and seek immediate medical attention if these occur.



Chat with health professionals, ask questions and seek advice.

“No matter how young or old you are, cancer can affect anyone. Attending your GP regularly is essential. Cattle get tested annually, and cars and tractors are serviced every year, so there is no reason why people can't get themselves checked over. I am lucky and so grateful to be here today to share my story and encourage other men to stay on top of their health.”

Tom Cushen, A dairy, beef and tillage farmer from Co. Laois and prostate cancer survivor



Cancer Risk Awareness and Prevention

It is vital for you to understand your cancer risks and ways to protect and prevent it developing. Depending on the type of farm you work on you may also face unique exposures that increase your likelihood of developing certain types of cancer. Understanding the risks and implementing preventive measures can help protect your health and promote a safer working environment.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) provide guidelines to address several key areas of cancer risk relevant to the farming community, including lung cancer, skin cancer and prostate cancer.

Lung Cancer

Farmers are often exposed to harmful substances such as pesticides, fertilisers, and dust from animal feed and silage. Prolonged exposure to these materials can increase the risk of lung cancer. To mitigate this risk, you should:

- ♥ **Use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):** Wearing masks or respirators when handling chemicals or working in dusty environments can reduce inhalation of harmful particles.
- ♥ **Ensure Proper Ventilation:** Adequate ventilation in sheds and storage areas helps minimise exposure to airborne toxins.
- ♥ **Quit Smoking:** Smoking is the leading cause of lung cancer. If you smoke you should seek support to quit, as this can significantly reduce the risk.

Skin Cancer

Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun is a significant risk factor for skin cancer, particularly for farmers who work outdoors for long hours. You should take the following precautions:

- ♥ **Wear Sunscreen:** Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher on exposed skin

(especially the head, ears, face including nose, neck and arms), reapplying every two hours. Get a pump bottle and fill with sunscreen. Fit it to the door frame of the shed or at the back door of the farmhouse. Use it regularly throughout the day, even when it's cloudy. Just because you can't see the sun doesn't mean it isn't able to do damage.

- ♥ **Protective Clothing:** Wearing long-sleeved shirts, wide-brimmed hats, and UV-protective sunglasses can shield the skin from harmful UV rays.
- ♥ **Seek Shade:** Whenever possible, you should take breaks in shaded areas, particularly during peak sunlight hours.

Prostate Cancer

Prostate cancer is a common cancer among men in Ireland. Risk factors include age, family history, and certain lifestyle choices. If you are male you can take proactive steps to reduce your risk:

- ♥ **Regular Check-Ups:** Men over the age of 50, or those with a family history of prostate cancer, should discuss screening options with your healthcare provider including a simple and quick blood test to measure PSA (prostate specific antigen). PSA is a protein made by your prostate gland. It is measured in nanograms per millilitre of blood (ng/ml).
- ♥ **The PSA test** measures the level of PSA in your blood and can be used to help diagnose prostate cancer or diagnose other prostate problems. Go to www.cancer.ie for more information or contact your GP.
- ♥ **Healthy Diet:** Consuming a balanced diet may help lower the risk of prostate cancer.
- ♥ **Physical Activity:** Engaging in regular exercise can improve overall health and may contribute to a lower risk of developing prostate cancer.



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Smoking and Alcohol Cessation

Reducing alcohol consumption and stopping smoking are essential steps in improving overall health and well-being, especially for farmers who often face high-stress and unpredictable environments.

Reducing Alcohol

Alcohol misuse can increase the risk of various health problems, including liver disease, heart disease, and certain cancers. Excessive alcohol consumption also impairs mental health, leading to increased anxiety, depression, and difficulty coping with stress—common challenges in the farming community.

The HSE recommends that men and women should not drink more than 17 and 11 standard drinks per week, respectively. You should aim to spread alcohol consumption evenly over the week and include at least three alcohol free days - zero alcohol on days when machinery is being used on the farm.

Some tips to help you to cut and or stop drinking alcohol are:

- 1 Set Limits:** Decide on a specific number of drinks you'll have in a week and stick to it. Track your consumption to stay accountable.
- 2 Take Drink-Free Days:** Incorporate alcohol-free days into your week to reduce dependency and give your body a break from drinking.
- 3 Avoid Triggers:** Identify situations or social settings that encourage you to drink and try to avoid or manage them with alternative activities.
- 4 Pace Yourself:** If you do drink, pace yourself by sipping slowly and alternating with water or non-alcoholic drinks to reduce your overall intake.
- 5 Seek Support:** Talk to your GP or use HSE services like AskAboutAlcohol.ie for advice, support, or counselling. Join a support group if necessary.
- 6 Reward Progress:** Celebrate small victories by treating yourself to something enjoyable with the money saved from cutting back on alcohol.

Stopping Smoking

Smoking is a leading cause of preventable illness and death, contributing to heart disease, lung cancer, and respiratory illnesses.

Farmers who quit smoking can significantly reduce their risk of these conditions, improving both their lung capacity and overall cardiovascular health. The HSE provides support through Quit.ie, offering resources, medications, and counselling to help people stop smoking.

Quitting smoking can lead to immediate health benefits, such as improved breathing and energy levels. Over time, the risk of serious diseases decreases, making it easier to maintain the physical demands of farming while also safeguarding mental health.

Here are six key tips to cut back or quit smoking based on HSE guidelines:

- 1 Set a Quit Date:** Choose a date within two weeks to quit smoking, giving yourself time to mentally prepare and make necessary arrangements.
- 2 Seek Support:** Contact your GP, pharmacist, or Quit.ie for free guidance. Use the HSE Quitline (1800 201 203) for extra support and personalised plans.
- 3 Use Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT):** Consider NRT products like patches, gum, or lozenges to reduce cravings. Ask your healthcare provider for advice on the best option.
- 4 Avoid Triggers:** Identify and steer clear of situations, people, or places that tempt you to smoke. Replace smoking with healthier habits, like drinking water or chewing gum.
- 5 Manage Withdrawal:** Prepare for potential withdrawal symptoms like cravings or irritability. These symptoms are temporary, and planning ahead can help you manage them effectively.
- 6 Reward Yourself:** Celebrate each milestone and use the money saved to treat yourself, reinforcing your progress and commitment to staying smoke-free.



Staying Fit for Yourself, Your Family and Your Farm Business

Working on a farm can take a toll on the body over time. Taking proactive steps to staying fit and ageing well is crucial. Maintaining good health and fitness as you age will help you to continue to work effectively and avoid injury or burnout. Here are some practical tips:

1. Incorporate Regular Exercise Beyond Farm Work

While farming involves physical labour, it often focuses on repetitive tasks that can strain certain parts of the body. Adding regular exercise outside of farming ensures that all muscle groups are engaged, and it also helps your mental wellbeing.

Activities to try include:

- ♥ **Walking or Hiking:** A brisk 30-minute walk each day improves cardiovascular health and strengthens leg muscles.
- ♥ **Strength Training:** Using weights or resistance bands can help maintain muscle mass, which naturally decreases with age. Focus on exercises that strengthen core muscles, shoulders, and legs to improve balance and prevent falls.
- ♥ **Stretching and Flexibility:** Gentle stretching especially as part of a cool-down routine after physical exercise, yoga, or Pilates can improve flexibility, which reduces stiffness and the risk of injury.

2. Maintain a Balanced Diet

Proper nutrition is essential for staying healthy and aging well. Eating a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins provides the energy and nutrients needed to keep the body strong. Practical steps include:

- ♥ **Eat More Fibre:** Whole grains, fruits, and vegetables are high in fibre, which aids digestion and helps control weight.
- ♥ **Hydrate:** Staying hydrated is crucial, especially for farmers working outdoors. Aim to drink plenty of water throughout the day. HSE guidelines are to drink approximately 2 to 3 litres (8 to 12 cups) of fluids per day and more if you are physically active or if there's especially hot weather.
- ♥ **Limit Processed Foods:** Reduce intake of processed foods and sugary drinks including those that contain high levels of caffeine that can lead to weight gain and cardiovascular issues.

3. Prevent Overuse Injuries

Farmers are prone to repetitive strain injuries due to the nature of their work. Over time, these injuries can worsen, leading to chronic pain. To prevent this:

- ♥ **Vary Tasks:** Switch between different jobs throughout the day to avoid overusing the same muscles.
- ♥ **Use Proper Lifting Techniques:** Bend at the knees and keep the back straight when lifting heavy objects to avoid straining the back.
- ♥ **Take Breaks:** Frequent breaks during physically demanding tasks can prevent overexertion and allow muscles to recover.



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4. Prioritise Joint Health

As farmers age, joint problems such as arthritis can become a concern. To protect joint health:

- ♥ **Stay Active:** Low-impact activities like swimming, cycling, or walking help keep your joints flexible without putting too much stress on them.
- ♥ **Maintain a Healthy Weight:** Carrying excess weight puts additional strain on joints, especially in the knees and hips. Pay attention to your nutrition and ensure you are getting enough fresh fruit and vegetables in your diet.
- ♥ **Use Supportive Footwear:** Proper shoes with good foot and ankle support can reduce the impact on joints and prevent foot and leg pain.

5. Get Regular Check-Ups

Preventative healthcare is key to ageing well. Regular visits to a doctor can help monitor blood pressure, cholesterol, and other health markers, allowing you to catch potential issues early. Routine screenings, including for heart disease and cancer, are essential, particularly for those with a family history of these conditions.

6. Balance Work and Rest

Farm work can lead to long hours, but rest and recovery are crucial for long-term health. Ensure that you:

- ♥ **Get Enough Sleep:** Aim for 7-8 hours of quality sleep each night to allow the body to recover.
- ♥ **Take Days Off:** Plan regular rest days or lighter workdays to give your body time to heal and recharge.
- ♥ **Take a Holiday:** If at all possible take proper time out for a complete break. It will help you to rest as well as give your brain time to come up with new ideas for your farm! It can also protect your relationships with family and friends. We know it is not easy to step back but your health and your farm will be the better for it.





Mental Health and Coping with Loss/Bereavement

Farm families face unique stressors that can lead to emotional distress, financial pressures, long working hours and the isolation of rural living.

This heightened stress can significantly increase the risk of mental health issues, including anxiety, stress, depression and suicidal ideation. Understanding how to manage these stressors is crucial for both mental and physical health.

Studies indicate that farmers have higher rates of suicide compared to the general population, with factors such as stigma surrounding mental health and limited access to support exacerbating the problem.

Mental Health and Farming

Farmers work in environments where many factors are beyond their control, including weather conditions, market prices, disease outbreaks or losing livestock, as well as long hours and financial pressures, all of which contribute to high levels of stress.

Teagasc's and Mental Health Ireland's booklet *Coping with the Pressures of Farming* highlights the importance of mental health for farmers, emphasising that mental resilience is not about avoiding difficulties but about how we respond to them.

Recognising the importance of maintaining strong mental fitness is a crucial first step and some ideas to build into your everyday life include:

- ♥ **Stay Connected:** Regularly spend time with family, friends, or fellow farmers to avoid feelings of isolation.
- ♥ **Practice Paying Attention:** Taking a few minutes each day to practice focused breathing or mindfulness exercises can reduce stress.
- ♥ **Seek Help When Needed:** Don't hesitate to talk to a healthcare professional or use services like Mental Health Ireland and the Samaritans if feeling overwhelmed or stressed.

Coping with Bereavement and Loss

For many farmers, bereavement comes in the form of losing a loved one, whether it's a family member, a friend, or a fellow farmer. Grieving is a natural process, but for farmers, the constant demands of the farm can make it difficult to take time to properly grieve.

The sense of duty to the farm can lead to a situation where grief is suppressed or ignored, which can result in long-term emotional damage. It's important to

acknowledge the feelings of sadness, anger, and even guilt that often accompany bereavement, and to allow space to process these emotions.

It is also important to remember that grief affects everyone differently. Some people may need more time to process loss, while others may find comfort in returning to daily routines. Neither way is wrong. The key is to listen to your own emotional needs and seek help if you feel stuck or unable to cope with the loss.

Coping with the Loss of Animals

For many farmers, animals are more than just livestock—they are integral to the farm's operations and can hold great sentimental value.

Losing animals, whether due to diseases like TB, accidents, or financial pressures, can be deeply distressing. The emotional impact of losing animals should not be underestimated. Whether it's a sudden outbreak of disease that wipes out a herd or the decision to cull animals for financial or health reasons, or the death of a much-loved farm dog, such losses can be as painful as losing a loved one.

The emotional toll of animal loss can be compounded by financial worries and the pressure to make difficult decisions, often quickly. It's important for farmers to acknowledge these emotions and understand that grieving for animals is normal and valid.

Coping strategies include sharing your feelings with trusted family members or fellow farmers who have experienced similar losses. Engaging with support groups or farming networks like the IFA can also provide comfort and practical advice.

Building Resilience

Resilience in farming is about being able to come back from setbacks, whether it's coping with personal loss or farm-related challenges. It is important to maintain a strong support network, which can include family, friends, fellow farmers, and mental health professionals.

Recognising when stress becomes overwhelming is a key step in taking control back. When feelings of sadness, anxiety, or helplessness persist for long periods, it may be time to seek professional support.

Many organisations provide resources and guidance to help you to navigate the pressures of your work and personal life – there is a list at the back of this booklet.



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The Importance of Support and Five Ways to Wellbeing

Farming is often a solitary job, which can increase feelings of isolation, loneliness, and stress. A strong support network can provide emotional, practical, and social assistance, helping farmers to cope with the challenges of their work and personal life. Whether it's family, friends, fellow farmers, or professional advisors, having people to share experiences, seek advice, and talk through difficulties is invaluable.

Developing relationships with local farming organisations, health professionals, or support groups, can offer you a safety net in times of need. This not only reduces stress but can improve overall wellbeing, ensuring that you remain mentally strong and resilient through the highs and lows of farm life.

For more information on the Irish Farmers' Association go to www.ifa.ie. T: +353 1 450 0266

The Five Ways to Wellbeing

The Five Ways to Wellbeing, based on research by the New Economics Foundation and promoted by the HSE, offer practical steps to improve overall wellbeing.

1. Connect

Staying connected with others is key to maintaining emotional health. Making time to talk with family, friends, or fellow farmers can provide much-needed social interaction and help reduce feelings of isolation

2. Be Active

Physical activity is proven to improve mood and reduce stress. While farming involves physical labour, it's important to engage in other forms of exercise, such as walking, cycling, or yoga.

3. Take Notice

Being aware of your surroundings and the present moment helps reduce stress and boosts mental health. You can benefit from taking time to appreciate nature, observe changes in your environment, and reflect on the positives in your day.

4. Keep Learning

Learning new skills or taking on new challenges keeps the mind active and builds confidence. Whether it's attending farming workshops, trying new farming methods, or exploring hobbies outside of farming, continuous learning stimulates mental health and prevents stagnation.

5. Give

Acts of kindness, whether big or small, enhance feelings of purpose and connection. You can give back to the community by sharing advice, supporting a neighbour in need, or contributing to local events. Giving helps create a sense of belonging and strengthens the support networks that are crucial for personal and community wellbeing.



Places to Seek Support

In Ireland, several organisations and initiatives provide support for farmers with their health and wellbeing. The following are just some examples.

Farm Support Organisations

- ♥ Teagasc provides educational programs on health and safety, mental health awareness, and best practices for managing stress and wellbeing. They also offer training workshops, resources on occupational health, and guidance on implementing healthy farming practices, fostering a supportive environment for farmers to thrive both personally and professionally. www.teagasc.ie. T: +353 59 917 0200
- ♥ The Irish Farmers' Association (IFA) advocate for farmers' rights, provide financial advice, and promote community engagement, ensuring farmers have access to essential support networks and information to enhance their overall quality of life. www.ifa.ie T: +353 1 450 0266

General Health and Wellbeing

- ♥ The Health Service Executive (HSE) offers both mental and physical health services, health promotion campaigns, and resources specifically tailored for rural communities. They provide accessible counselling, support groups, and educational programmes, empowering farmers to prioritise their health and wellbeing. www.hse.ie

Heart Health and Awareness

- ♥ Croi: Croí promotes heart health and stroke awareness and prevention and related wellbeing through education, resources, and support programs tailored for farmers and rural communities in Ireland. www.croi.ie. Support Line: 091 544310
- ♥ HSE Advice: <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronary-heart-disease-chd/>

Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing

- ♥ Samaritans: Provides a support through its 24/7 helpline for anyone in distress, lonely, struggling to cope or feeling suicidal. T: 116 123
- ♥ Mental Health Ireland provides information and resources aimed at improving mental health and resilience across communities www.mentalhealthireland.ie.
- ♥ Pieta House provides free therapeutic support to people who are in suicidal distress and those who engage in self-harm. www.pieta.ie. T: 1800 247 247.

Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse Support

- ♥ Women's Aid National Helpline: 1800 341 900 – www.womensaid.ie.
- ♥ HSE: <https://www2.hse.ie/mental-health/life-situations-events/domestic-violence-and-abuse/>

Addiction Support Services

- ♥ HSE Addiction Services support the provision of an integrated range of preventative, therapeutic and rehabilitation services. <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/5/addiction/>
- ♥ www.drugs.ie. National Support Line: 1800 459 459.

Bereavement and Farm Accidents

- ♥ Embrace Farm: www.embracefarm.ie. Tel: 085 7709966
- ♥ HSE Support Services: <https://www2.hse.ie/mental-health/services-support/bereavement/>



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