

A little less quad might be good for your quads

Quad bikes are a fabulous tool but can reduce beneficial exercise

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Irish farmers in the working age group (16-65 years) are five times more likely to die due to cardiovascular disease (CVD) than comparable occupational groups.

This alarming fact comes from an examination of CSO death certificates by Dr Breda Smyth MD, a public health specialist with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

CVD is largely preventable if you follow the right diet and exercise steps. A regular health check (see your doctor or some pharmacists do this for free), cessation of smoking – should you need to, increasing your exercise levels, changing your diet and controlling your weight will massively reduce your risk.

Teagasc, in association with health professionals, has formed a consortium to research and promote farmers' health, in particular CVD.

Hugely beneficial

Exercise is hugely beneficial for mental as well as physical health. It reduces your risk of heart disease, diabetes and a number of cancers, as well as being a very good way to manage stress and control your weight.

Traditionally, farming has been considered to be one of the most active occupations. However, tractors, ATVs and offroad SUVs have taken some of the physical work out of farming.

As a result, farmers may not be as physically active as they used to be, though evidence to prove this has not been available. So, a study was carried out by WIT, UCD and Teagasc into the levels of exercise farmers are achieving in their day-to-day lives.

Farmer exercise study

Fifteen male farmers, with written consent, completed the international physical activity questionnaire – short form (IPAQ-SF). They also wore an accelerometer (ActivPAL) for measuring physical activity from waking until bedtime for seven consecutive days, while doing normal farming and non-work related activities.

The duration and intensity of physical activity level of the farmers was calculated using both questionnaire and accelerometer

Participants were aged between 39 and 69, with an average of 48 years. Most were full-time farmers with various enterprises (intensive dairy, dairy and sheep, suckler cattle, and dry stock cattle) and farms ranging from 21ha to 81ha.

Body mass index (BMI) of the farmers ranged from 22.9 to 30.7, with an average of 26.7, which is classified as overweight.

The accelerometer data showed that farmers achieved a range of 8,047 to 19,768 steps per day (averaging 14,163). This was double the levels reported in the questionnaire.

The general recommendation for health is 10,000 steps or greater. The study indicates that most farmers are gaining adequate steps, but they underestimated their number of steps in the questionnaire.

The study found that farmers spent approximately two-thirds of a day sitting, sleeping or lying down per day (mean 16 hours), with a mean

of 4.2 hours standing and 2.9 hours stepping.

In terms of developing guidelines on cardiovascular and overall health of farmers, the study indicates that the following areas need to be explored further: dietary behaviours leading to being overweight, stress associated with higher work intensities, intensity of physical activity undertaken and participation levels in leisure time sport and exercise.

In summary, the study indicated that estimation of physical activity is a poor way to judge physical activity level and that among this group of farmers, most were getting enough steps for health.

So how much activity is enough?

The experts say that people should accumulate at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on at least five days a week.

For some, this could mean going for a brisk walk; for others, it might mean doing something more structured, such as going to the gym or playing an active sport. It doesn't

mean having to run a marathon.

And remember, it's never too late to start – in fact, the more unfit a person is, the more they have to gain.

Just be sure to do what's right for you and if you don't know, get advice from your doctor or an exercise instructor.

If you have not exercised for some time or if you are concerned about a health issue, you should talk to your doctor before you start. Use the guidance below to plan activities you might build into your everyday life.

- **Cut down on:** Watching TV, being on a computer, excessive use of quad bikes, offroad SUVs, tractors when moving around farm, sitting for more than 30 minutes at a time.
- **Two to three times a week:** Do strength and flexibility exercises.
- **Five to seven days a week:** Do aerobic exercise. Accumulate at least 30 minutes five days a week. Jog, cycle, brisk walk, swim, dance, hike.
- **Every day:** Be active. Make a conscious effort to walk or exercise instead of using vehicles.



The benefits of being active

The following are some of the reasons why farmers become inactive:

- Farmers spend more time sitting while machinery does the work.
- Some farmers stop taking part in sport when they feel that they can no longer do it competitively.
- Many farmers struggle to find time for exercise when balancing their work and family life.
- Some farmers simply get out of the habit of exercising and are not sure how to start back, or what kind of exercise to do.

The benefits of taking exercise:

- Keeps your heart strong.
- Helps to manage your weight.
- Keeps your joints moving and flexible.
- Strengthens your muscles and bones.
- Helps you to relax and sleep better.
- Gives you more energy and zest for life.
- Helps recovery after a heart attack.
- Gives you a feeling of well-being.

Further exercise monitoring

Teagasc has procured a set of up-to-date wrist-worn accelerometers and would like to hear from a number of groups to trial wearing this equipment to monitor exercise levels. Enquiries to david.meredith@teagasc.ie

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