

## Teagasc Grange – health and safety

## Heart health – changes are needed

Farmers aged 17 to 64 are seven times more likely to die of cardiovascular disease (CVD) than salaried employees. Simple steps can reduce your risk.

**John McNamara**  
Teagasc Health and Safety specialist



**Diana van Doorn**  
Teagasc Walsh Scholar



A recent major study on improving farmer's cardiovascular health was led by Diana van Doorn, Teagasc PhD Walsh Scholar at the Centre for Men's Health, IT Carlow. The cardiovascular disease (CVD) study was conducted over 12 months among 868 farmers, who participated in the Farmers Have Hearts' CVD Health Programme (FHH-CHP).

A key positive finding is that over the course of the study, 81% of participating farmers made lifestyle changes and those with four or more risk factors for CVD declined by 6%.

Van Doorn stated: "Though 6% may seem like a small change, it is very significant. Farmers are a high-risk group for CVD, with three-quarters of those in the study having four or more risk factors. It is great to see reductions in blood pressure, cholesterol, waist circumference and the experience of stress for so many of the farmers who participated."

All farmers undertook a health check at the start and end of the year-long study. They chose the approach that best suited them from the following options:

- **Health coach** – contact by phone with a nurse/health coach, who supported lifestyle changes.
- **M-Health** – a series of mobile phone text messages that outlined positive health strategies.
- **Combination** – a combination of health coach and M-Health,
- **Usual care** – continued with usual health practices.

Both health coach and M-Health received an 89% positive rating, while health checks received a 98% ranking. "Making small but significant changes can greatly improve CVD health," says study co-author Noel



Richardson, director of the Centre for Men's Health, IT Carlow.

"Recommendations include having a regular health check, controlling diet and weight and getting adequate, moderately vigorous exercise, along with having a lifestyle that minimises stress.

"Social/family support to maintain such lifestyle practices is vital," he added. The results of the study demonstrate that with the right support, farmers are strongly motivated to adopt and maintain healthier lifestyles.

#### Major study

The HSE, supported the study by funding farmer health checks, which were carried out by Irish Heart Foundation (IHF). Glanbia provided financial support and facilitated operation of the project at Agri-Branch venues, as well as making contact with farmers.

Mart managers and staff provided venues and assisted in making contact with farmers. The UCD School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sport Science provided assistance with data analysis and interpretation.

The Farmers Have Hearts' Car-

diovascular Health Programme (FHH-CHP) study can be found on the Teagasc website. Visit the Lifestyle Village at the Teagasc Grange Open Day.

#### Fingal Farmers Group

This north Dublin group consists of farmers of all ages, both male and female, from all types of farms including dairying, drystock, horticulture and tillage and was set up to try to improve health and safety on farms in the area.

The group has carried out a number of different initiatives to reduce farm accidents and improve the health and wellbeing of its members. They have held farm safety training days, suicide alertness training, as well as organising health screening which was carried out at the VHI vista clinic in Swords. If issues were discovered, people were sent on for further tests.

Teagasc tillage specialist Shay Phelan, who was an advisor to this group, comments: "As this leading group has shown, a short but regular 'slot' on health and safety at group meetings is in everyone's interest and is every bit as important as production or management issues."