



Health myths exposed

By LYNDALE READING

THE expanding girth of rural Victorians is smashing the myth of healthy country living.

A snapshot of the health of Victorian farming families has shown 73 per cent of men and 61 per cent of women were classified as overweight or obese.

The data is from almost 1000 participants in the Department of Primary Industries Sustainable Farm Families program, where farmers and their partners are given free health assessments and workshops.

Principal investigator Susan Brumby said a breakdown of the data showed 21.6 per cent of men and 25.8 per cent of women were obese.

She said the figures were above national averages of 16.5 per cent for men and 18.5 per cent for women.

She said the mechanisation of farming could be contributing to farmers' weight gain.

"Tractors are being used for vast areas and people don't even have to get in and out of them," Ms Brumby said.

"Access to sporting facilities or gyms and access to football and cricket fields during the drought is an issue."

Ms Brumby said more than a third of participants had high blood pressure

and more than a third reported having moderate to severe body pain in the past four weeks that affected their daily lives.

But there were low smoking rates among the group.

Participants were asked to develop a plan that may include exercise, eating better and taking a holiday, with a view to improving their health during the three-year program.

Otway Division of General Practice medical director Dale Ford said the data defied the ideal that a rural lifestyle was healthy one.

"Although the myth is that it involves lots of activity, the truth is with the mechanisation of farming the physical work is lower," Dr Ford said.

"Historically farmers have worked physically hard all day and did not need exercise.

"Now there's lots of lifting, but not walking, which burns fat."

A further 500 farmers will get access to the free health assessments and workshops following a \$2.18 million grant from the Victorian Government.

Anyone wishing to participate in the workshops can phone DPI Tatura (03) 5833 5222 or www.sustainablefarmfamilies.org.au.