

# Farmers fail health test



More than 50 per cent of farm men are overweight and there are more obese farm women than men, according to research.

CATHERINE MILLER reports.

**F**ARMERS may work in fresh air and open spaces but the odds of living a long, healthy life are against them.

According to Victorian health figures, the average life expectancy for women living in metropolitan areas is 84 years of age compared with about 81 for rural women, and the gap is even wider between urban and rural men.

High stress levels and chemical usage, poor dietary habits and many accidental deaths are all contributing to these alarming statistics which also follow a similar trend in other states, according to Scott McCoombe, from the National Centre for Farmer Health at Hamilton.

The centre - opened in November, 2008 - is a partnership between Deakin University and the Western District Health Service.

Dr McCoombe, who was one of the keynote speakers at the recent Women in Agriculture & Business SA conference, is part of a team of health professionals aiming to raise awareness of the importance of health, wellbeing and safety to the farming population.

"Agriculture is one of the most dangerous occupations in the world and if you are a farmer you are three to four times more likely to die at the workplace than other jobs," he said.

With machinery replacing

much of the physical labour once needed in farming and many poor eating habits, Dr McCoombe said obesity was one of the most chronic health conditions.

Farmers were piling on the kilos with just a quarter of farming men and 40 per cent of women in the healthy weight range.

"More than 50pc of farm men are overweight and there are more obese farm women than men," he said.

Dr McCoombe said obesity led to an increased risk of certain cancers, Type II Diabetes and cardiovascular disease and, in Victoria, there was "tsunami" with some rural areas having up to 10pc of its residents predisposed to or suffering from diabetes.

Farmers were over-represented in many preventable diseases because they worked long hours and had less access to medical care.

They are also more stoic and less inclined to seek medical attention after sustaining on-farm injuries, leading to further complications, he said.

But two members of Western District Health Service, Susan Brumby and Stuart Willder are working hard on a program bring developed to highlight the health, wellbeing and safety of those who are a farm's biggest asset.

In the past nine years, more than 2500 farmers from across Australia have participated in the

Sustainable Farming Families program, which encourages farmers to speak more openly about their health, regularly visit their GP, and even teaches them the nutritional value of food and how to eat a balanced diet.

Dr McCoombe said many past participants in the workshops had changed their lifestyle and eating habits. He encouraged farming groups of 10 to 20 families to run SFF workshops in their area.

"If you are not healthy enough to enjoy farming, you will not be healthy enough to be profitable," he said.

"Farmers already work longer hours and are getting older, which is obviously an issue, but if they are not fit physically or mentally they will not be as successful."

•Details: [www.farmerhealth.org.au](http://www.farmerhealth.org.au)

## Frightening statistics

- Eighty to 100 farmers die from on-farm accidents each year
- Tractor fatalities closely followed by falls
- Motorbikes involved in 15-20 deaths/year; majority four wheelers
- One child dies every fortnight on Australian farms
- In Victoria, 27pc of farmers are diabetic or have elevated blood sugar, compared with 16pc of the state's population



**STAY FIT:** National Centre for Farmer Health lecturer Dr Scott McCoombe says the key to productive farms is healthy farming families.

## Life expectancy at birth by sex in metropolitan and rural LGAs

