

# FARMER HEALTH FACT SHEET

## SOUTHERN REGION

### TAKING CONTROL OF YOUR PERSONAL HEALTH

Farming can be physically demanding, however with the increased use of machinery and technology it is no longer the active occupation it once was. Looking after your health is important for you, your family and your business. Can you afford to risk time off because of a serious illness or injury?

#### KEY POINTS

- ▶ The healthy lifestyle often associated with farming is largely a myth. In general, people living outside major cities are more likely to engage in behaviours associated with poorer health.
- ▶ Around 75 per cent of Australians aren't getting enough exercise to meet their recommended daily requirements. A lack of physical activity is the fourth leading cause of disease in Australia.
- ▶ An active person is less likely to develop cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and osteoporosis, have a stroke or get certain types of cancers.
- ▶ Regular moderate activity can make a difference to your personal health. Participate in physical exercise that raises your heart rate for 30 minutes each day.
- ▶ Get a check-up from your trusted health professional annually.

Being active every day is vital to maintain a healthy body and mind, however, many rural people are not active enough and often struggle to include exercise in their daily routine. In fact, compared to people in major cities, those in regional and remote areas are less likely to report very good or excellent health, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Rural populations show a significantly higher burden of the major factors that contribute to disease, in particular, high blood pressure, obesity, physical inactivity and smoking. All of these factors link to major disease and lead to a lower life expectancy for people in regional and remote areas.

Maintaining a healthy body weight and being active decreases your risk of serious health conditions such as:

- ▶ diabetes;
- ▶ heart disease;
- ▶ some cancers;
- ▶ mental health problems; and
- ▶ musculoskeletal aches and pains.

The good news is that you can take control and help prevent some of these health issues.

***"There is no point having a great bottom line if you are not around to enjoy it."*** SUSTAINABLE FARM FAMILIES™

#### Where do I start?

If you learn more about your personal health and risk factors, you can take preventative action.

Many physical injuries sustained on-farm result from doing work with unfit, unconditioned bodies. Putting aside the necessary time to improve general fitness will trim tummies and prevent injuries.

A health check from your GP or health professional is important to help find, prevent or reduce the effect of disease and ensure you are on the right track to good health. Getting an annual check-up is like

getting the tractor serviced before it breaks down.

#### Key health indicators

##### Blood pressure

High blood pressure can strain your heart and speed up the process of coronary heart disease. Help lower your blood pressure by reducing excess body weight, being physically active, limiting your alcohol intake and adopting a low salt diet.

##### Blood cholesterol

There are three types of blood cholesterol. **Low density lipoprotein (LDL)** is known as 'bad' cholesterol because it can add to the build up of plaque in your arteries and increase your risk of coronary heart disease. **High density lipoprotein (HDL)**, known as 'good' cholesterol, helps to protect against coronary heart disease. **Triglycerides** are the 'ugly' lipids and are found in many processed foods including alcohol. To control blood cholesterol levels you need to enjoy healthy eating, including eating foods low in saturated fats.

##### Healthy weight

Being overweight increases your risk of coronary heart disease, high blood pressure and cholesterol, diabetes and gall bladder disease, gout, arthritis and other joint issues, sleeping problems, including sleep apnoea, and certain types of cancers. Your risk of developing these health conditions also depends on other risk factors.

People come in all shapes and sizes, so what might be a healthy weight for one person isn't necessarily healthy for another.

Regardless of your height and build, excess fat around the waist can increase the risk that you will develop a chronic disease.

*Tip: One of the health indicators is waist circumference. For most people, a waist measurement greater than 94 centimetres for men and 80cm for women increases their health risk. A waist measurement over 102cm for men and over 88cm for women can indicate that your health is at high risk.*

## Measuring waist circumference.



A healthy body mass index (BMI) can reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease. BMI is a measure of your body weight in relation to your height (weight divided by height in metres squared). For example, if you are 165cm tall and your weight is 70 kilograms, your BMI would be 25.7 ( $70/1.65 \times 1.65 = 25.7$ ) and classified as overweight, (see Table 1).

## Diabetes

Diabetes is a chronic disease with serious complications. About 275 Australians develop diabetes every day. The rates of mortality due to diabetes are two times higher in remote areas than in Australia's major cities.

Type 2 diabetes is the most common form of diabetes, and results from a combination of genetic and environmental factors. It is where the pancreas makes some insulin but not the amount your body needs. Diabetes Australia estimates that up to 60 per cent of type 2 diabetes can be prevented. You are at a higher risk of getting type 2 diabetes if you:

- ▶ have a family history of diabetes;
- ▶ are older (over 55 years of age);
- ▶ are physically inactive;
- ▶ have a large waist measurement; and
- ▶ have high blood pressure.

## Respiratory illness

Farmers have a higher risk of developing respiratory illness than people working in other professions due to the organic and inorganic dust, toxic gases and agricultural chemicals they can inhale (see Table 2).

**TABLE 1 Body Mass Index.**

Waist measurement	Healthy weight BMI = 18.5-25	Overweight BMI = 25-30	Obese BMI = 30+
Men: 94-102cm Women: 80-88cm	Lowest risk of health problems	Increased risk of health problems	High risk of health problems
Men: more than 102cm Women: more than 88cm	Increased risk of health problems	High risk of health problems	Very high risk of health problems

ADAPTED FROM: WWW.CANCER.ORG.AU

The most common respiratory illnesses include asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, hay fever, allergic rhinitis, bronchitis and chronic hypersensitivity pneumonitis.

Respiratory protection should include wearing a mask, respirators or other protective equipment; following recommended guidelines when applying pesticides and agro-chemicals; using fans, exhaust blowers and filters to maximise ventilation in confined areas; and wetting down grain bins or dusty areas before cleaning.

## Cancers

People living with cancer in regional and rural areas have poorer survival rates. Factors that contribute to lower survival rates include:

- ▶ reduced rates of physical activity;
- ▶ increased rates of high risk alcohol consumption;
- ▶ higher rates of smoking;
- ▶ increased sun exposure;
- ▶ later diagnosis; and
- ▶ poor access to early intervention.

## Skin cancer

Approximately two in three Australians will be diagnosed with skin cancer before the age of 70. There are three main types of skin cancer (see Figure 1):

- ▶ **Melanoma.** These are the most dangerous types of cancers, spreading throughout the body. They often start as a mole and become darkened and have an irregular border.

- ▶ **Basal cell carcinoma.** This is the most common, but least dangerous form. It grows slowly usually on the head neck and upper torso. It may appear as a lump or a dry, scaly area.

- ▶ **Squamous cell carcinoma.** This type can spread to other parts of the body if not treated. It grows over some months and appears on skin exposed to the sun. It can be a thickened, red, scaly spot that may bleed easily or ulcerate.



**FIGURE 1 What does skin cancer look like?**

## Diet

To address diet-related health problems you should limit foods containing saturated fat such as biscuits, cakes, pastries, pies, processed meats, commercial burgers, pizza, fried foods, potato chips, crisps and other savoury snacks.

The Australian dietary guidelines feature five principal recommendations:

1. To achieve and maintain a healthy weight, be physically active and choose nutritious foods and drinks to meet your energy needs.
2. Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods from these five groups (see Figure 2) every day: vegetables; fruit; grain foods; lean meats, poultry, fish, eggs, nuts and seeds; and milk, yoghurt, cheese and their alternatives.

**TABLE 2 Respiratory hazards for grain farmers.**

Exposure type	Source	Environments
Organic dusts	Grain, hay, cotton, silage, animal feed, microorganisms, animal particles	Machine sheds, livestock buildings, silos
Inorganic dusts	Silicates, asbestos, plastics	Field work, harvesting
Gases	Ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, nitrogen oxide, methane, carbon monoxide	Animal houses, manure pits, silos, fertiliser, bushfires
Pesticides	Organophosphate, paraquat, methlbromide	Field work, storage
Fertiliser	Ammonia	Field work
Welding fumes	Ozone, metals	Welding
Solvents and fuel	Diesel fuel, detergents	Vehicle exhaust, storage

ADAPTED FROM: SUSTAINABLE FARM FAMILIES – RESPIRATORY HEALTH, 2009.

- Limit intake of foods containing saturated fat, added salt, added sugars and alcohol.
- Encourage, support and promote breastfeeding.
- Care for your food, prepare and store it safely.

### Be a label reader

Find out more about what you are eating by learning to read the information on food products (see Figure 3). Sometimes it is not clear from the ingredients list if a product is a healthy choice and so it is helpful to understand how to read the nutritional information panel.

### Building exercise into your daily routine

The great thing about exercise is that it is easier to build into your every day life than you may think. Physical exercise can benefit your cardiovascular system, immune system, brain function and improve quality of sleep.

Regular exercise may be effective in preventing and alleviating the symptoms of depression. Physical activity also burns up stress chemicals, like adrenaline, which promotes a more relaxed state of mind.

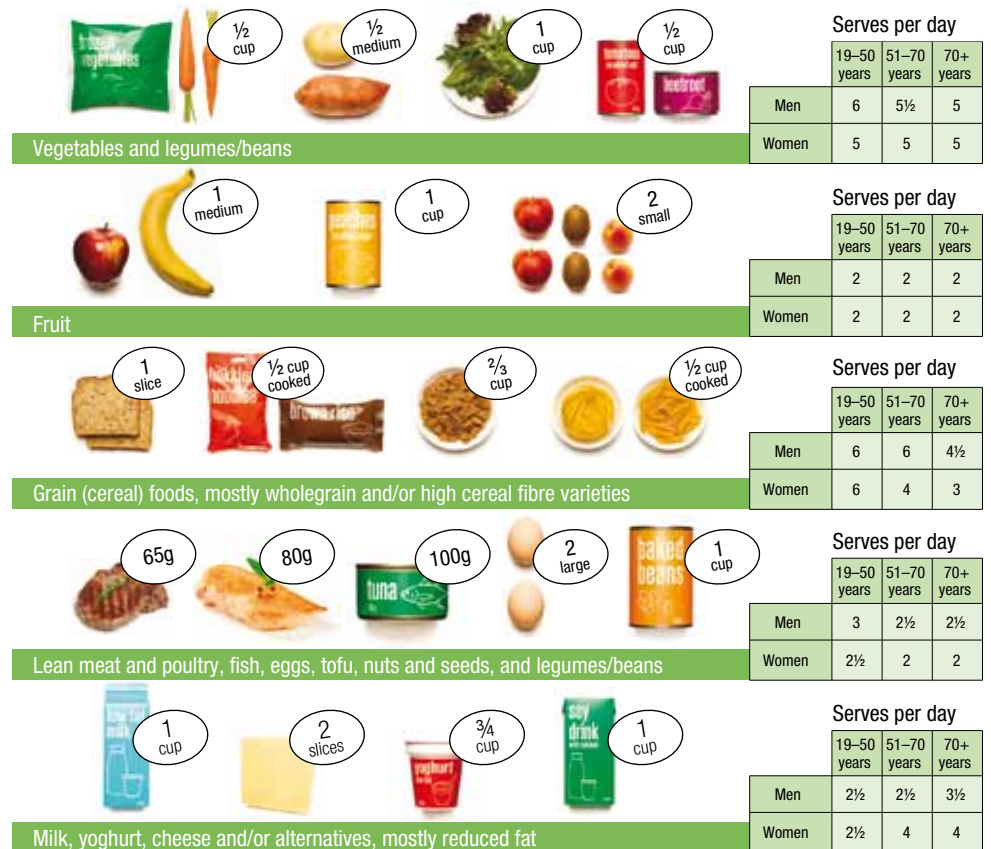
There are lots of ways to incorporate activity into your daily routine:

- walk or ride a bicycle to check crops or stock;
- do some stretches before you start work and throughout the day;
- wash the car or machinery by hand;
- do some gardening, mow the lawns with a push mower, dig a veggie patch; or
- participate in a structured recreational activity like golf, tennis, water-skiing and so on.

You don't need expensive equipment and physical activity does not have to be a structured exercise. Make a point to go for a 30 minute brisk walk every day. Walking is an activity that everyone can do regardless of age, sporting ability or fitness level. It's free and good exercise if you keep up the pace.

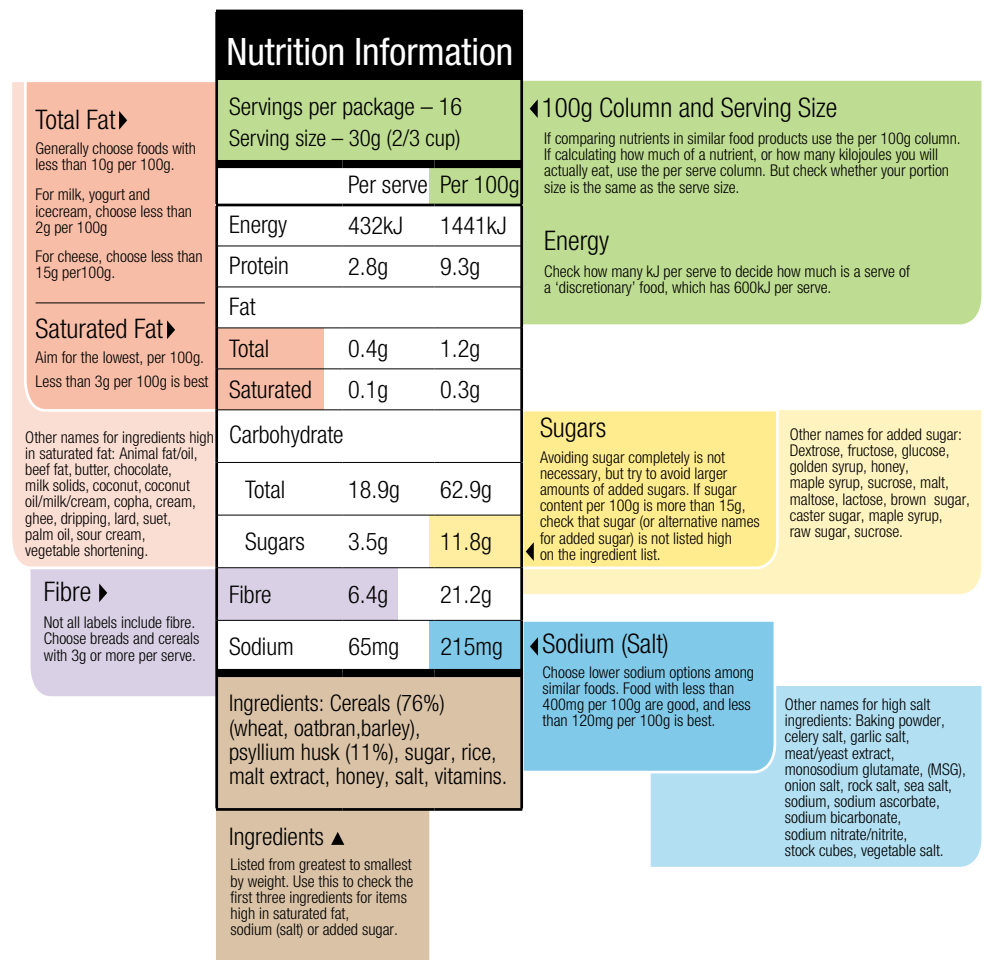
*Tip: Aim for 10,000 steps per day, which is roughly equivalent to eight kilometres. Use a pedometer to count your steps, you might be surprised how quickly they add up. There are some useful phone apps that can do this for you.*

**FIGURE 2** Recommended serves per day of the five food groups and examples of serving size.



SOURCE: WWW.EATFORHEALTH.GOV.AU.

**FIGURE 3** General guidelines for making healthy choices.



The following activities have similar health benefits:

- ▶ walking 3km in 30 minutes;
- ▶ swimming laps for 20 minutes;
- ▶ cycling 8km in 30 minutes;
- ▶ washing and waxing the car for

45 to 50 minutes; and

- ▶ digging or weeding the garden for 45 to 60 minutes.

Stretching is another important element to include along with aerobic exercise and strength training. Flexibility improves your body's range of movement and helps

improve balance, counteracts muscle tension and stiffness and may help to relieve stress.

Remember to exercise with care and protect yourself from the sun. If you are over 35, seek professional advice from your GP before beginning a new diet or exercise regime.

## Your health checklist

Do you know your:

- ▶ waist measurement?
- ▶ body mass index (BMI)?
- ▶ blood pressure?
- ▶ blood glucose level?
- ▶ cholesterol level?
- ▶ risk of heart disease?
- ▶ the disease history of your family? For example, has a direct family member suffered a cardiac event prior to 65 years of age?

Do you:

- ▶ visit your GP for a check up annually?
- ▶ visit your dentist annually?
- ▶ get your eyes checked if you are over 40?
- ▶ get screened for skin or bowel cancer?
- ▶ have a pap smear or breast screen test at the recommended intervals if female?
- ▶ have your prostate checked at the recommended intervals if male?

Remember: Screening tests help doctors detect many diseases such as cardiovascular (heart) disease, diabetes and some cancers in their early stages.

How do your health drivers stack up?

- ▶ How often do you exercise?
- ▶ How many serves of vegetables do you eat each day?
- ▶ How many pieces of fruit do you eat each day?

Do you:

- ▶ wear a broadbrim hat, long sleeves and use 30+ sunscreen to protect yourself from sun damage?
- ▶ smoke?
- ▶ have any alcohol free days in a week?
- ▶ take time out for yourself?

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### What should I do with my health records?

It is a good idea to keep all your health records and information in one place. The Australian Government has launched eHealth.gov.au, which is a secure online summary of your health information. You can control what goes into it, and who is allowed to access it.

### Should I see a health professional?

It is important to seek professional help and advice when it comes to your health and wellbeing. You should get a check-up from your GP before making any significant changes to your exercise routine or the food you eat. They might even help you set up a program to improve your overall health and fitness level and reduce your risk of getting a preventable illness.

Having a regular doctor or practice that you visit can have several advantages, including building a relationship over time and feeling more comfortable talking openly. Your doctor will get to know you and understand your health needs and concerns, working with you to meet your goals.

### How much exercise do I need?

The National Physical Activity Guidelines (2010) recommend at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, preferably all, days. A good example of moderate-intensity activity is brisk walking, that is at a pace where you are able to comfortably talk but not sing. Other examples include mowing the lawn, digging in the garden or medium paced swimming or cycling.

Short bouts of around 10 to 15 minutes each can be accumulated to reach the recommended 30 minutes (or more) of moderate-intensity physical activity. To prevent weight gain as well as manage cardiovascular health, the Australian Dietary Guidelines suggest a minimum of 45 to 60 minutes per day.

## USEFUL RESOURCES

### Australian Dietary Guidelines

[www.eatforhealth.gov.au](http://www.eatforhealth.gov.au)

### Building emotional resilience Fact Sheet

[www.grdc.com.au/GRDC-FS-EmotionalResilience](http://www.grdc.com.au/GRDC-FS-EmotionalResilience)

### Diabetes Australia

[www.diabetesaustralia.com.au](http://www.diabetesaustralia.com.au)

### Exercise and depression Fact Sheet

[www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/docs/exerciseanddepression.pdf](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/docs/exerciseanddepression.pdf)

### Heart Foundation

[www.heartfoundation.org.au](http://www.heartfoundation.org.au)

### Life! Helping you prevent diabetes, heart disease and stroke

[www.diabeteslife.org.au](http://www.diabeteslife.org.au)

### National Rural Health Alliance

[www.ruralhealth.org.au](http://www.ruralhealth.org.au)

### National Centre for Farmer Health

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

### Rural and Regional Health Australia

[www.ruralhealthaustralia.gov.au](http://www.ruralhealthaustralia.gov.au)

## MORE INFORMATION

For more information contact your local GP or health professional.

## PROJECT CODE

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