

IMPROVEMENTS IN HEALTH STANDARDS REPORTED IN NATIONAL SURVEY

Survey results

The Minister for Health and Children, Micheál Martin TD, recently announced results from the largest survey of its kind in Ireland, reporting that 55% of Irish people felt their health to be excellent or very good, an increase of 6% since the inaugural survey of 1998. However, the growing incidence of obesity (13%) is emerging as a major cause for concern.

The two part survey was the second in a series commissioned by the Department of Health and Children and was carried out by the Centre for Health Promotion Studies, National University of Galway.

The study consisted of the Survey of Lifestyles, Attitudes and Nutrition (SLÁN) and the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children Survey (HBSC). The in-depth study recorded detailed data from 5,992 adults and 5,712 school-aged children. The surveys provide valuable information for policy and programme planning in the health service.

The Minister for Health and Children proposes repeating the National Surveys at four-yearly intervals, to help identify behaviour and attitudes in Ireland and allow Ireland to make direct comparisons with the health-related behaviour of populations across Europe.

Decline in smoking

One of the key, pertinent findings was the decline in the number of Irish people currently smoking. In 1998, the first National Health and Lifestyle Survey found that 31% of the population engaged in cigarette smoking, but by 2002, reported levels had dropped to 27%. Almost all age groups and social class groupings have produced levels of decline. However, the Minister highlighted that certain social categories, amongst 15-17 year old males, were still a cause for concern as this group was unique in reporting growth in the area of smoking.

The report points to the decline in exposure levels to passive smoking in areas such as the workplace, at home and on public transport — areas which have to some extent been affected by legislation. However, passive smoking in pubs and clubs remains high, affecting 47.3% of men and 31.6% of women.

Commenting on the report and its findings, Minister Martin said: “This survey is extremely valuable in terms of its provision of relevant data and information for the development and implementation of policy and programme planning within my department and indeed, other statutory and non-statutory sectors.

“The report allows me to prioritise the health needs of the

nation and whilst I am cognisant of the continual need for health promotion, I am satisfied that we have witnessed a notable fall in the prevalence of reported smoking, particularly amongst 12-14 year olds. This pattern may be indicative of the success of the anti-tobacco campaign and I will continue to develop initiatives and implement policy, particularly targeted at primary school children, which is aimed at persuading even more people to stop smoking or to avoid starting. I am also mindful of the effects of passive smoking in public areas such as pubs and clubs and the unacceptable level of people affected by passive smoking in these environments.”

Healthy eating

One of the more positive findings of the SLÁN survey, according to Minister Martin, was the increase in the adherence to the recommended consumption levels of fruit and vegetables (61% to 69%), which is now more uniformly prevalent across all social categories, with a noted increase amongst men. The ‘four or more’ message has been widely promoted by the Health Promotion Unit through its annual National Healthy Eating Campaigns. However, the Minister cited concern that many children were not eating sufficient healthy food choices, particularly fruit and vegetables, and were leading increasingly sedentary lives with levels of physical activity decreasing as children got older.

Obesity in Ireland

One of the emerging areas of disquiet highlighted in the report is the increase in the levels of obesity in Ireland. “With busy, modern lifestyles, people are finding less and less time for physical activity. Inactivity, coupled with poor eating habits, can lead to overweight and obesity which are not only serious problems in themselves, but can lead to further complications, such as diabetes,” said Minister Martin. “This is an area which my department will be tackling over the coming months and upon which I propose placing a particular and concerted emphasis.”

Drinks culture

Alcohol once again proved to be a problem area, despite an increase in the number of schoolchildren (40%) reporting to never having consumed an alcoholic drink (up from 31% in 1998).

The number of adults drinking more than six drinks on an average session, which is classified as binge drinking, has increased amongst men from 35% in 1998 to 41% in 2002 and from 12% to 16% amongst women. In addition, over

30% of males and 22% of females consume more than the recommended weekly alcohol limit. Overall, 25% of children report having had a drink in the last month, with 30% reporting having been 'really drunk'.

The Minister reiterated the need for the expedient introduction of new alcohol intervention policies in order to help tackle the so-called 'drinks culture' that has developed in Ireland.

Need for improvement

Professor Cecily Kelleher, surveys scientific director at NUI Galway, said: "It is encouraging that, to some extent, Irish people feel better, are smoking less and are adopting, albeit slowly, healthy eating habits. However, as a nation, we are still consuming more alcohol and our overall levels of inactivity are a major cause for concern.

"There are a number of class structure variations in almost every area examined and these studies allow us to focus on the areas that need improvement."

Summary of key findings

General health

- 55% of the population thought their health to be very good or excellent, compared to 49% in 1998.
- The priorities for improving general health are ranked in order as: less stress; more willpower; more money; change in weight; less time in smoky places.
- Adults aged 18-34 report best levels of health (65%).
- Smokers tend to rate their health less well than non-smokers, i.e. 60% of non-smokers rate their health as excellent or very good, with 44% of smokers providing the same response.
- The GP is the highest ranked source of health-related information (59%), but the media has an important role to play for 44% of the population and, for the first time, the Internet was measured as a source of health-related information and was ranked by 12% of the population.
- 86% of children report their health to be good or excellent.
- Three-quarters of children look to their mother for advice.

Smoking

- Overall cigarette smoking rates, across virtually every demographic category since the first survey in 1998, have fallen.
- The highest smoking rates are among the younger adult population:
 - 34% aged 18-34 (39% in 1998)
 - 25% aged 35-54 (30% in 1998)
 - 17% aged 55+ (20% in 1998).
- Among school-going children, 19% report that they are current smokers (21% in 1998).
- Exposure to passive smoking has fallen in the workplace, at home and on public transport. However, passive smoking in pubs and clubs affects 47.3% of men and 31.6% of women.

Alcohol

- 83% of men (82% in 1998) and 74% of women (70% in 1998) reported having consumed alcohol within the past month.
- 14% (13% in 1998) report drinking five or more times a week.
- 41.4% of men and 16.2% of women, when consuming alcohol, drink more than six drinks on average (34.7% and 11.6%, respectively in 1998).
- 25% of children reported having had a drink within the last month (divided evenly by gender).
- Trends are more marked with younger age groups, with fewer people in the 10-14 age categories reporting that they had a drink in the last month, compared to 1998.
- 40% of school-going children have reported to never having had an alcoholic drink, up from 31% in 1998.
- 30% of children report having been 'really drunk'.

Drugs

Cannabis

- 9% of respondents (8% in 1998) report use of cannabis in the past year:
- 12% of men (11% in 1998)
- 7% of women (6% in 1998).
- Usage is notably higher among third level educated people.

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- 11% of children reported using cannabis in the past year (10% in 1998).

Ecstasy

- Almost completely confined to those aged 18-34 years.
- 6.4% reported use in 2002 (4.9% in 1998).

Food and nutrition

- An increased number of adults (69% up from 61%) reported eating the recommended number of four or more portions of fruit and/or vegetables daily.
- 11% of respondents reported eating fried foods four or more times per week. There was a higher prevalence amongst males and those in the 18-34 year old bracket.
- Rates of obesity have risen by 3% to 13% in both men and women since the last survey in 1998.

Overall adult weight analysis

- Normal weight – 54% (58% in 1998).
- Overweight – 34% (32% in 1998).
- Obese – 13% (10% in 1998).
- 13% of respondents reported being on a weight-reducing diet.
- 15% of girls and 16% of boys never eat fruit or eat it less than weekly.
- 12% of girls and 14% of boys never eat vegetables or eat them less than weekly.
- 15% of children never have breakfast during the week and 8% never have breakfast at weekends.
- 7% of 10-11 year old girls and 7% of 10-11 year old boys said they were on a weight-reducing diet. A further 17% of each in this category said that they needed to lose weight.
- 18% of 12-14 year old girls (7% of boys) were on a diet and a further 26% of girls (16% of boys) said that they needed to lose weight.
- Overall, 37% of women report having breastfed any of their children. The highest breastfeeding rates are amongst women of higher education levels and over 35 years.

Exercise

- 51% (52% in 1998) reported engaging in some form of regular physical exercise.

- 22% (25% in 1998) did mild exercise four times per week; 32% (31% in 1998) did moderate exercise three or more times per week and 11% (10% in 1998) did strenuous exercise three or more times per week.
- The outstanding group engaging in strenuous exercise is younger males aged 18-34.
- 28% (21% in 1998) reported doing no exercise at all, i.e. 30% of men and 25% of women.

Exercise – children

- 48% of children report exercising four or more times per week; 12% exercise less than weekly.
- Big gender differences exist in those that exercise four or more times per week (59% of boys, 38% of girls).
- Exercise levels drop as children get older
 - 4 times a week or more – 59% of 10-11 year olds.
 - 4 times a week or more – 53% of 12-14 year olds.
 - 4 times a week or more – 35% of 15-17 year olds.
 - This trend is particularly noticeable amongst girls.

General lifestyle

- Of those who are sexually active, there is a higher rate of contraception/protection use reported amongst women than men:
 - Men: 26.3% (35.6% in 1998)
 - Women: 42.9% (31.2% in 1998).
- Use of the contraceptive pill by sexually active women is up by 5% to 30%.
- 59.7% of sexually active men report condoms as the most frequently used method of contraception, up nearly 12% from 1998.
- 54.9% of boys (60% in 1998) and 24.5% of girls (29.6% in 1998) have been involved in a physical fight in the past 12 months.
- 27.6% of boys (29.5% in 1998) and 22.4% (19.9% in 1998) of girls have been bullied at school in the past couple of months.
- 30% of boys (34% in 1998) and 15.3% of girls (14.1% in 1998) have taken part in the bullying of another student at school in the last couple of months.
- 84% of front car passengers always wear their seatbelt (68% in 1998).