

Conclusions

The North/South Ireland Food Consumption Survey

The results of this survey show that the trend towards obesity in Ireland has increased significantly since 1990. Over the past 10 years obesity has increased 2.5-fold in men. Over 20% of men are now obese, up from 8% ten years ago. In women, obesity prevalence is 16%, up from 13%. However, the highest prevalence of obesity in any group is in women over the age of 50 years, at almost 30%.

The high prevalence of obesity has significant health implications. Obesity is strongly related to Type 2 diabetes, and is also linked with increased risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, gall bladder disease, bone joint disorders and certain cancers. The incidence of obesity increases with age and the findings predict that a significant increase in adult-onset diabetes will face the health services over the coming years.

Overall, physical activity levels were low, particularly in women. Participation rates in recreational – particularly vigorous recreational – activities were low. Watching TV monopolised a major portion of available leisure time for men and women of all ages.

An increasingly inactive lifestyle is a contributory factor to the strong upward trend in overweight and obesity, as well as contributing independently to increased risk of chronic disease.

Energy intakes have not changed significantly over the past 10 years despite the increase in prevalence of obesity. However, there is evidence of underreporting of energy intake, in common with all surveys in which self-reporting of food consumption is employed.

When energy from alcohol was excluded, the mean daily fat intakes (as a percentage of energy) in men and women were higher, and mean daily carbohydrate intakes were lower, than current dietary recommendations. An increased intake of carbohydrate would seem desirable to coincide with a reduction in fat intake. Deficiencies in the database for fatty acid contents of foods did not permit the estimation of intakes of fatty acid categories; this will be reported later.

More than three out of four adults do not meet the nutritional goal for dietary fibre intakes (25 g per day). The mean daily fibre intake was below the minimum of the recommended range in almost one-half of women and one-quarter of men. This is likely to contribute to impaired bowel function and constipation, which in turn may contribute to increased risk of chronic gastrointestinal disease.

The survey found that while intakes of most vitamins and minerals are adequate in the population, women are more likely than men to have diets inadequate in vitamins and minerals. A significant prevalence of inadequate intakes was observed for iron, calcium and folate in women. Among women of reproductive age few achieved the folate intake recommended for the prevention of neural tube defects in newborn infants and almost half had inadequate iron intakes. Almost one-quarter of women had inadequate intakes of calcium. A substantial proportion of men and women had low vitamin D intakes and were largely dependent on sunlight to maintain adequate vitamin D status.

In general there is little evidence of excessive intakes of vitamins or minerals. There appears to be little risk of exceeding the tolerable upper intake levels (ULs) for vitamins and minerals from food alone. A small proportion of women exceeded the UL for vitamin B₆ and iron as a result of supplement use.

These are the first detailed data reported for nutritional supplement use in Ireland. Almost one in three women and one in six men are regular supplement users. Among users, supplements make a very substantial contribution to micronutrient intakes, in some cases significantly exceeding that provided from foods. This has important implications for the design of future food consumption surveys. Many existing nutrient intake databases in Europe are based on surveys in which supplement use was not carefully recorded.

The survey reveals a considerable level of complacency regarding the need to make dietary changes and to control body weight. On the other hand, a significant proportion of individuals (especially women) are trying to change their diet and there is a high level of awareness among the population overall of the need to take more exercise.

Overall, this survey reveals a number of nutrition and lifestyle issues that have important implications for public health. Further analysis of the database will be required to develop a better understanding of patterns of food and nutrient intake, and their association with lifestyle and demographic factors, in order to provide a stronger base for development of policies and programmes for improving public health.

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