

**Comparative diet and lifestyle study between Irish and West Virginian women** By G. NOLAN, S. FRIEL and C. KELLEHER, *National Nutrition Surveillance Centre, Department of Health Promotion, University College Galway, Republic of Ireland*

Following the establishment of links between the Department of Community Medicine, West Virginia University, U.S.A. and the Department of Health Promotion, University College Galway it was proposed that a joint project be carried out to compare diet and exercise patterns of women in Ireland and West Virginia.

Both areas have very similar demographic characteristics and are essentially rural with many small communities isolated from centres of population and industry. The people of Ireland and West Virginia suffer predominantly from the same major chronic diseases -heart disease and cancer.

A comparison was carried out of diet and lifestyle of similar women's organisations in Ireland (Irish Countrywomen's Association) and West Virginia (West Virginia Extension Homemakers Clubs). The aim of the study was to determine the dietary intake and lifestyle habits of the women in both countries, and to assess their knowledge and attitudes in relation to diet, lifestyle and health. A postal self-administered questionnaire was sent to 400 women in each country and an overall response rate of 56% was achieved.

Results showed that 44% of Irish women were in the overweight category as compared with 33% of West Virginian women, (both based on Irish cut off limits B.M.I 25-30) while a further 8% of Irish women were obese compared with 30% of those in West Virginia (both based on Irish cut off limits B.M.I 30+) Some 45% of West Virginian women and 50% of Irish women had modified their diet during the previous year due to concern with a healthy diet. The next most important reason for diet modification was to treat overweight.

While 60% of West Virginian women drank low fat milk, only 33% of their Irish counterparts did likewise. The vast majority of both groups of women cooked with vegetable oils (92%) and used low fat methods to cook vegetables.(93%)

In both countries 75% of women engaged in exercise as a method to improve health or fitness, or as a means weight control (55%) and stress reduction (51%) Walking (40%) followed by gardening (22%) were the most frequent forms of exercise in both groups. The two main barriers to participating in exercise were 'lack of time due to family commitments'(36%) , followed by 'lack of interest'(22%). Overall the results showed that the women have some similar characteristics in terms of eating and exercise patterns. While they also have a similar degree of overweight, obesity was a greater problem in American women and self reported indications are that lifestyle changes are more likely in this group. Based on the results of this comparative study it may be possible to design similar lifestyle intervention programmes for the Irish and American women.