

# Community connection for healthier and safer farmers



Victorian Workplace  
Mental Wellbeing  
Collaboration

## National Centre for Farmer Health

Farmers are getting older, working harder and longer, and have high rates of injury, illness and premature death. Sustainable Farm Families™ is a targeted health promotion program, which aims to improve the health, wellbeing and safety of farmers, and to close the health gap between farmers and the general population.

Organised by the National Centre for Farmer Health, the program focuses on promoting mental wellbeing by connecting farmers and their families with the broader community, industry experts and health services to equip farm men and women with the knowledge and motivation to look after themselves and their businesses.

Over a three-year period, workshops are delivered to farmers, who are encouraged to develop an action plan. Evaluation in the form of health monitoring, surveys and personal follow up has illustrated the ongoing effectiveness of the program.

### The highs and lows of farming life

The most valuable asset on a farm is the health, wellbeing and safety of those working and living on the farm. However, there are often situations in the farming industry where farmers have high demands on their body or their finances but very little control over the consequences; such as adverse weather, changing prices, pests, or access to services and expertise.

Geographic isolation and lack of time means that farmers are reluctant to seek help, increasing the potential for physical and mental illness. Some farmers report that in times of stress, especially financial, there is an inclination to 'make do' and 'get by', which can result in cutting corners on safety or not attending to a personal health issue.

And finally, the work and home lives of farmers are so intertwined that any period of stress on the farm can impact mental wellbeing and home life. Likewise, if a farmer is unwell, productivity and business output can be restricted.

### Focusing on Sustainable Farm Families™

Over a period of three years, farmers attend annual workshops held in community halls, on dates selected to suit the farming calendar, with childcare support. The workshops cover health, wellbeing and safety in an inclusive approach involving farm men and women and are delivered within the framework of improving business. There are cross-sector partnerships between health, agriculture, research and industry; for example, agriculture industry representatives co-facilitate the workshops and local health service provider links are made. Regular health assessments, referrals, surveys and follow up provide farmers and the program organisers with feedback on progress.

Victorian dairy farmers, Jane and Bruce McNaughton participated in the program 10 years ago and are still reaping the benefits of the changes they made as a result. Jane, just diagnosed with diabetes at the time, was finding it challenging to navigate the healthcare system and the millennium drought was causing increasing mental and financial stress. She said: 'I've been to so many workshops and talks, but realised I'd never been to anything about my own health and wellbeing. What's the point of being good with your cows, good with water management, or good with your property if you're not there?' As a result of the program, Jane and Bruce reduced their stock, and therefore their workload, which helped them get through the challenges they faced at the time. Bruce concludes: 'The program gave us new knowledge and skills that still have a big influence on our health, wellbeing and safety practices today.'

## Improvements for farmers and their businesses

More than 2300 farm men and women have completed the Sustainable Farm Families™ program since it was piloted in 2003. Numerous independent evaluations have shown that the program is an effective way to improve farmer health, wellbeing and safety.

Interestingly, more than 70 per cent of participants were referred to local health services in the first year. Evaluations have shown that:

- Improvements are made in all parameters for all at risk males and most at risk females. These include: BMI, waist circumference, blood cholesterol, blood glucose, systolic and diastolic blood pressure
- Farmers with the highest number of health risks receive the most benefits from the program
- Health literacy for both men and women increases significantly
- The majority (93 per cent) of farmers surveyed felt that the program had provided them with skills to help make changes in their lifestyle, enabling them to implement healthy and safe behaviours
- The majority (93 per cent) of farmers surveyed reported that they had increased confidence in their ability to manage their own health and wellbeing.

National Centre for Farmer Health

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

Sustainable Farm Families™

**[www.farmerhealth.org.au/sustainable-farm-families/sff-programs](http://www.farmerhealth.org.au/sustainable-farm-families/sff-programs)**

The Victorian Workplace Mental Wellbeing Collaboration is a partnership between SuperFriend, VicHealth and WorkSafe Victoria. We are working together to help workplaces create positive and supportive work cultures and environments by focusing on organisational leadership and encouraging workplaces to implement positive mental wellbeing strategies that enhance existing policies and processes.

For more information, please visit:

**[www.leadingwellvic.com.au](http://www.leadingwellvic.com.au)**

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