



# Growing pains: there may be trouble ahead for Ireland's ageing population

Over one-third of people over 70 say they are not properly cared for. Between 40% and 50% of over 50s do not exercise regularly and some have 'great difficulty' making ends meet. A new study of the over 50s makes for worrying reading. By **John Downes**



**W**OMEN in Ireland aged 50 and over are significantly more likely to report feeling depressed than their male counterparts, with differences between the sexes becoming more pronounced as they get older, groundbreaking research to be launched tomorrow has revealed.

The Irish section of the Survey of Health Ageing and Retirement in Europe (Share) report also suggests women over 50 are more at risk of struggling to "make ends meet" than men.

They are also more likely to suffer from a chronic ill-

ness, and are generally less financially secure.

Based on a nationally representative sample of over 1,100 men and women aged 50 and over, the study provides a fresh insight into the scale of the future challenges faced by the government due to an ageing Irish population.

It reveals one in five people over 50 say they regularly drink alcohol at least three to four times a week.

A similar number also said they are smokers, although almost 60% of women and 40% of men said they had never smoked.

But in a finding that is likely to prompt concern among health professionals, between 40% and 50% of those surveyed said they never undertake "vigorous activities" such as sports, strenuous housework or jobs involving physical labour.

At a time when the overall age profile of the Irish population is set to increase significantly, this suggests they may be storing up problems for the future unless further action is taken to promote healthier activity among this age group.

## Women more depressed

The Irish section of the study was undertaken between February and December of 2007 by interviewers who were specially trained by the ESRI.

The research was overseen by one of the state's leading research institutes, the Geary Institute at University College Dublin.

A total of 515 men and 588 women took part, with 22% of the female interviewees wid-

owed, compared to 8% of men.

It is due to be launched in UCD tomorrow.

According to the research, when they were asked if they had felt sad or depressed in the past month, 40% of women aged 80 and over responded that they had felt this way.

This compares with just over a quarter of men aged over 80 and marks the continuation of a gender gap seen in all categories of over 50s in this aspect of the study.

For example, around one in three females aged 50 to 59 said they had felt sad or depressed, compared to around a quarter of males.

But this figure rose to around 36% of females in the 60-69 and 70-79 age groups, compared to just over 20% of men aged 60-69 and just under a quarter of men aged 70-79.

Respondents were also asked about the extent to which they had difficulty making ends meet.

## Men making ends meet

While 31% of males said they find it easy to make ends meet, this figure falls to 25% for their female equivalents.

Similarly, 11% of women over 50 said they have "great difficulty" making ends meet, compared to 7% of males.

But the vast majority of respondents - 86% - also said they own their own home.

The research also reveals children of the over 50s are often not "flying the coop."

For example, almost one in five of the 85% of respondents who said they have children said at least one of their

first three children still lived in the same household as them.

In 10% of cases, at least one of their children lived nearby but in 15% of cases their children live in another country. Older people are frequently not receiving the care they need, the research suggests.

More than one-third of 70- to 79-year-olds who said they needed help undertaking daily living activities such as dressing, eating and shopping, said the help they received did not meet their need for care.

This figure rose to almost half of those aged 80 and over.

Almost one-third of individuals aged 50-59 years old said they have a long-term illness, a figure which increases as they get older.

This trend is mirrored by figures for the numbers who said they had visited their GP at least once in the past 12 months.

In findings that are likely to make interesting reading for members of the government in light of last week's announcement that the automatic entitlement to a medical card is being withdrawn for the over 70s, the research shows 93% of people in this age group said they had seen their GP at least once in the previous 12 months.

This compares to 80% of 50- to 59-year-olds surveyed.

But women reported higher levels of long-term illness than men, with over 50% of those surveyed saying they suffered from this.

### Importance of education

Three out of 10 people surveyed said they suffer from high blood pressure, the most common condition for men and women.

Arthritis and osteoporosis are more common among women than men, although men are twice as likely to

have suffered a heart attack (10% for men versus 5% among women).

Just under one in five people aged 70-79 had spent at least one overnight visit as an inpatient in hospital, while significantly more men (over 30%) than women (just over 20%) in their 80s and older had done so.

Interestingly, the survey also finds that the level of education attained by an individual is a significant factor when it comes to "life satisfaction."

For example, those with a third-level education reported higher levels of life satisfaction than those with just a primary or no education.

Similarly, those with a third-level education generally reported themselves to be among the healthiest groups when compared to their counterparts with just a primary education.

### Key issues for over 50s

One of the authors of the research, Dr Liam Delaney of the Geary Institute, told the *Sunday Tribune* the overall study is an attempt to assess what the key issues facing our over 50s are now, and what they are likely to be in the future.

He noted financial worries faced by women in particular may be partly attributable to the fact that, because they have often spent less time in the labour market, they tend to have built up less pension and other benefits.

"Many women are not in the PRSI system long enough to earn the type of benefits

they need," he said. "One of the reasons for doing Share is to start a debate about how to address this.

"Many people of both sexes are under financial strain, and when you are older and also socially isolated, that is not a good combination."

He noted various government departments and agencies have endeavoured to increase rates of exercise among older people.

"The high percentage of unmet care needs is definitely something we need to think about more," he added. "It is definitely a big concern when it comes to what essentially is a very vulnerable group."

### Ageing successfully

He also pointed out that rates of pension provision remain higher among younger Irish males than females, suggesting the current challenges facing our over 50s "could easily be replicated in future generations."

"There are two major realities about ageing which are addressed in this study. One is finance, the other is health," he said.

"The aim is, at a really early stage, to gear us up for making that shift as our population ages, and how to make the changes to the health services and pensions that we need.

"Nowadays, people are living functional lives well into their 80s. But if we don't take account of the challenges this entails, then we are not going to age successfully as a society. And that is something we are all going to have to live with."

