This bulletin presents some of the key findings from the third Health and Social Wellbeing Survey 2005/06.

Central Survey Unit was commissioned by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to conduct a survey on the health and wellbeing of the Northern Ireland population.

The survey covered a broad range of issues and was designed to yield a representative sample of adults aged 16 and over living in Northern Ireland.

The survey was carried out by Central Survey Unit between February 2005 and March 2006 on a random sample of 5000 private addresses in Northern Ireland. The results presented are based on information from 4245 individuals.

**General Health**

Overall, 63% of people said their health had been ‘good’ in the previous 12 months, 23% said it was ‘fairly good’ and 15% said it was ‘not good’.

36% of men and 40% of women indicated that they have a long-standing illness.

The proportion of men and women with a long-standing illness increased with age. 12% of men and 14% of women aged 16-24 had a long standing illness in comparison to 68% of men and 70% of women aged 75 and over.

Respondents were asked if they had ever been informed by a health professional that they had experienced severe back pain in the 12 months prior to the interview.

Respondent were asked if they had ever experienced certain medical conditions (Table 1). 10% had been told by a doctor that they were suffering from asthma and 6% from angina. 76% stated that they had not experienced any of the conditions mentioned.

**Diet and Nutrition**

Just over a quarter (27%) of adults said they eat on average five portions of fruit or vegetables per day. Women were more likely to have eaten on average five portions of fruit or vegetables per day (31%) than men (22%).

Respondents aged 55-64 (34%) were more likely to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables per day than those aged 75 and above (18%) or 16-24 (20%).

Table 2 illustrates food products consumed by respondents on most days.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Products consumed most days</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Processed meat/ chicken products</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potatoes</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chips, Roast Potatoes</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biscuits</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweets and chocolate</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisps, tortilla chips</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cakes, buns, desserts</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugary fizzy drinks</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base</td>
<td>4240</td>
<td>1743</td>
<td>2497</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cigarette Smoking & Drinking

26% of people aged 16 and over reported that they currently smoke cigarettes – 25% of men and 27% of women, 30% had given up smoking and 44% had never smoked cigarettes.

The prevalence of cigarette smoking was highest in the 25-34 age group (35%) and lowest amongst those aged 75 or above (7%).

13% of smokers smoked an average of 25 or more cigarettes a day. Men who smoked were more likely than women to be heavy smokers, 17% and 10% respectively.

Mental Health

Respondents were asked about the level of stress they had experienced over the previous 12 months. Overall, 10% of persons aged 16 and over had experienced a great deal of worry or stress and 67% had experienced little or no worry or stress.

Women were more likely to have experienced a great deal of worry or stress than men, 11% compared with 8%.

19% of all people aged 16 and over showed signs of a possible mental health problem such as depression, by scoring highly on the GHQ12. Women were more likely to show signs of a possible mental health problem (21%) than men (16%).

Respondents were asked about the amount of social support they received from family and friends.

Overall, 39% of people aged 16 and over experienced a lack of social support, with 13% experiencing a ‘severe lack’ of social support.
Obesity levels were estimated using the Body Mass Index. This is a widely used indicator of body fat levels which is calculated from a person's height and weight.

As part of the survey height and weight measurements were sought from all individuals aged 2 or above at cooperating households.

**Adults**

Overall, 59% of adults measured were either overweight (35%) or obese (24%). A similar proportion of men (25%) and women (23%) were obese. Men were more likely (64%) than women (54%) to be either overweight or obese.

Obesity was most prominent amongst the middle aged. Almost a third (29%) of 45-54 year olds were obese, compared with 13% of those aged 16-24.

29% of young men aged 16-24 and 32% of young women were either overweight or obese.

Before their height and weight was measured, respondents were asked how they felt about their weight. Overall, 47% felt their weight was about right, 39% felt they were too heavy and 4% felt they were too light. Women (45%) were more likely than men (33%) to feel they were too heavy.

**Children**

The calculation of BMI in children depends on the age and sex of the child as well as their height and weight.

There is some debate over the most appropriate way to use BMI to measure childhood obesity rates in the UK. One approach uses the United Kingdom National BMI percentiles. Using this approach, 18% of children aged 2-15 were obese, 20% of boys and 15% of girls. Just over a third (36%) were either overweight or obese. There are some concerns that this method could overestimate obesity.

An alternative approach to measuring childhood obesity which is gaining acceptance was put forward by the International Obesity Task Force. Using this approach, nearly one in ten (8%) children were obese, 8% of boys and 7% of girls. Just over one in four (26%) were either overweight or obese. There are some concerns that this method could underestimate obesity.

Children aged 8 or above were asked if they were trying to lose weight, gain weight or not trying to alter their weight. The majority, (91%) were not trying to alter their weight, 7% were trying to lose weight and 2% were trying to gain weight.

Breast screening & cervical smear tests

86% of women aged 20-64 had taken a cervical smear test. Of these women, 35% had taken the test in the previous year, 26% between one and two years ago, with almost one in ten (9%) indicating it was more than five years since they had the test.

Those women who had never taken a cervical smear test, but were invited/advised to do so, were asked about reasons why they had not taken the test. Just over a quarter (28%) said they were too embarrassed, 22% said they couldn’t go at a convenient time, and 21% were afraid it might be too painful.

Women aged 50-64 were asked if they had ever undergone breast screening. 84% had undergone breast screening at some point in their lives.

34% of those who had been screened had undergone breast screening in the previous year, 34% between a year and two years ago, 26% between two and five years ago, 4% more than 5 years ago and 2% could not remember when they were screened.
Physical Activity

Within the definitions used in the survey, 23% of all people aged 16 and over can be classed as sedentary. That is, they have not performed any activity of at least a moderate level, lasting 20 minutes, on at least one occasion in the last 7 days.

The elderly are considerably more likely to be sedentary than the young. 63% of people aged 75 and over were sedentary in comparison to only 10% of 16-24 year olds.

The most popular sports/exercises were - going to a gym/exercise bike/weight training (33%), swimming (32%), exercises (e.g. press-ups, sit-ups) (31%) and football or rugby (25%).

Respondents were asked how often they had gone on a walk of at least 15 minutes at a time in the last 4 weeks. This included country walks and walks in the course of their work or to and from work.

Just over three fifths (61%) of respondents took at least one walk of 15 minutes or more a week.

Overall, 23% of people said that they were not regularly active in the previous six months and did not intend to be so in the next six months.

29% of men and 33% of women said they had an injury/disability/medical condition which limits their physical activity; however this did not necessarily stop them from taking above recommended levels. 16% of respondents who said they had an injury/disability/medical condition of this sort took above the recommended level of physical activity.

Allergies

Respondents were asked if they had any allergies and a quarter (26%) reported at least one allergic reaction. The most common allergies were to grass/pollen (12%), house dust (5%), antibiotics (5%), certain foods (4%) and domestic pets/horses or animals (3%).

Just under a quarter of people who reported an allergic reaction to foods were allergic to milk (23%), wheat (18%), fruit (16%) and eggs (14%).

Just over a quarter (28%) of people who reported food allergies were allergic to other foods including cheese products, spicy foods and gluten products.

6% of people with an allergy, (2% of all respondents) had been told by their doctor that they had suffered a life threatening allergic reaction or anaphylactic shock brought about by their allergy.