

Ireland: Obesity, the “Western Diet” and the Global Food Challenge

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Recent reports have suggested that Ireland is set to become the most obese country in Europe.

Estimates of obesity, projected out to 2030, are part of the World Health Organisation’s Modelling Obesity Project and were presented at the European Congress on Obesity in Prague, Czech Republic during May 2015. The [figures for Ireland](#) have huge implications for the seriously financially-squeezed Irish health system:

In terms of obesity alone, the estimates show a big jump for women in the Irish Republic, soaring from 23 per cent to 57 per cent. The proportion of obese Irish men was expected to increase from 26 per cent to 48 per cent, while the figure for those either overweight or obese rises from 74 per cent to 89 per cent.

According to a combination of statistics from WHO, OECD and Eurostat Ireland is third in obesity levels in Europe after Hungary and Great Britain.

There is no doubt that there is a link between levels of obesity and what is known as the Western pattern diet. The [Western diet](#) has been characterised ‘by high intakes of red meat, sugary desserts, high-fat foods, and refined grains. It also typically contains high-fat dairy products, high-sugar drinks, and higher intakes of processed meat.’ However, there is a certain smugness in the mainstream media which points at fast food restaurants as the source of all food evils in society yet on a recent visit to a ‘good’ restaurant Dublin I noticed that at least 80% of the clientele were overweight and about 20% were grossly overweight.

Yet, in all fairness, it is almost impossible to avoid fatty foods when you go to these restaurants because the ‘vegetarian’ section of the menu can be just as rich as the carnivore sections, for example, salads with salad cream and oil, ‘creamy’ mash made with cream and butter, ‘Mediterranean’ roasted vegetables roasted in oil, grilled aubergine covered in oil and mozzarella etc.

There is also the global cost of the Western diet with the increased demand for red meat and meat products. According to the [FAO](#) (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations):

Meat consumption in developing countries has been continuously increasing from a modest average annual per capita consumption of 10 kg in the 1960s to 26 kg in 2000 and will reach 37 kg around the year 2030 according to FAO projections. This forecast suggests that in a few decades, developing countries’ consumption of meat will move towards that of developed countries where

meat consumption remains stagnant at a high level.

It is [estimated](#) that the 70 billion farm animals raised globally contribute to 51% of all anthropogenic greenhouse emissions found in our atmosphere. According to [ScienceDirect](#), agriculture globally 'accounts for 92% of the global freshwater footprint; 29% of the water in agriculture is directly or indirectly used for animal production' and according [Livestock Exchange](#) 'Livestock systems occupy 45% of the global surface area'. The [FAO](#) also states that 'almost 50 percent of the grains produced in the world are fed to livestock, yet there remain about 800 million people suffering from hunger and malnutrition mostly in the developing countries.'

Richard Oppenlander notes, in his book *Food Choice and Sustainability: Why Buying Local, Eating Less Meat, and Taking Baby Steps Won't Work*, that 'one cow will provide 300 pounds of meat, which results in 120 pounds per 1 acre of land used in one year. For reference, an organic vegetable farm [...] produces on average 5,000 to 10,000 pounds per 1 acre of food, such as tomatoes, fast-growing greens, and herbs that are infinitely healthier for us to consume. (pps 85-86)

In Ireland, a [government fact sheet](#) on agriculture shows that '81% of agricultural area is devoted to pasture, hay and grass silage (3.63 million hectares), 11% to rough grazing (0.47 million hectares) and 8% to crops, fruit & horticulture production (0.38 million hectares).' In other words, 92% of all agricultural land goes towards the raising and feeding of cattle and 8% to plant-based food.

As Oppenlander also notes:

Of the four leading causes of death and disease in the U.S. today, animal products and animal protein are implicated in all four - coronary heart disease, cancer, cerebrovascular disease, and diabetes, as well as their precursors, hypertension and obesity. (p.256)

The research work of [biochemists, doctors and surgeons](#) (such as T. Colin Campbell, Caldwell Esselstyn, John McDougall, Neal Barnard etc) into the relationship between nutrition and disease has been met with industry opposition yet they have provided clear evidence of vastly improved health with dietary change away from the Western diet pattern. Their collective pursuance of a whole food, plant-based diet leads the way to a more enlightened understanding of diet and food production.

Countries like Ireland have a huge investment in cattle and dairy production but a new mindset will have to be developed both by farmers and consumers alike. It has often been said that Ireland has 'forty shades of green' yet in reality there is only one shade - the colour of grass - and this needs to be changed to a landscape of multi-varied crops instead.

If people change their dietary habits (in clear knowledge of the relationship between their diet and their overall health) then farmers will also be able to gradually move away from meat production and towards more tillage with huge benefits to our collective health and the environment.

[For a collection of resources compiled by the author on the whole food, plant-based diet, food and food production documentaries, etc. see [here](#).]

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