



Safety for Aging Farmers

Many Alberta farmers continue to farm after the age of 60. According to Alberta Labour Force statistics, nearly half the seniors in the workforce in Alberta are farmers.

Out of 24 farm-related fatalities in 2002 in Alberta, 38 per cent of deaths were people aged 59 and older. Tractor rollovers were the most common cause of injury, followed by being pinned or hit by machinery.

Seniors often have to deal with physical factors that decrease their ability to perform tasks that were routine in the past. These changes can affect reflexes, quickness and accuracy while performing farm chores. The loss of vision and depth perception can also impair the ability to operate machinery properly.

- As age increases, vision decreases. It takes four times the amount of light for a 40-year-old to see as clearly as a 20-year-old. For a 65-year-old, it takes double that of the 40-year-old. To add to the risk, farmers rarely work with enough light. A disability in vision can result in a lack of awareness of hazards or a lack of ability to operate machinery properly.
- As aging progresses, hearing loss occurs. Farmers usually suffer more noise related hearing loss than the general public. This loss could lead to the inability to hear approaching machinery or people.
- General health issues such as arthritis and rheumatism, which decrease mobility, are more prevalent in older farmers.

- The use of prescription drugs can also affect the safety of the farmer; drugs can slow reaction times and cause fatigue.

The facts

- From 1990 to 1998, 36 per cent of all farm fatalities in Canada involved senior farmers. The majority of these deaths were caused by tractor rollovers, and the second most common cause of death was being pinned or struck by a machine.
- In an aging population, many physical factors influence the ability to perform and accomplish farm tasks. Among the physical abilities that decline are reaction time, strength, flexibility, eyesight and hearing. Farmers may compensate for decreased physical capabilities by adopting unsafe work habits or taking shortcuts in established practices.
- Quick reactions and accuracy are very important when dealing with machinery. Reaction time is dramatically affected by age. Muscles lack the ability to work as fast as they once did. Restricted head or neck movement may affect the ability of the aging farmer to see and maneuver machinery.
- Balance and control of motion are also affected by aging. Loss of balance or dizziness can cause a fall, leading to serious injury, especially around moving or unguarded parts of equipment.

Reaction time is dramatically affected by age

Issue

Senior farmers have a higher risk of injury and death as a result of physical limitations. Work practices and views on safety are deeply ingrained and difficult to change after a lifetime of farming. For farmers who view risk taking as routine, the added risk brought on by age-related disabilities can easily lead to injury or death.

Safety precautions

As a senior farmer, you can decrease the hazards of farming by constantly assessing your abilities against the demands of the tasks on the farm. Work with family members and friends to identify the hazards of each task on the farm and consider the physical and intellectual abilities required to do the task in a safe manner. Make adjustments to the task or assign the task to a different person as necessary.

General precautions to consider:

- Increase light in low visibility areas.
- Complete tasks while there is lots of daylight. Vision is most hampered at dusk and dawn.
- Take regular rest breaks, as fatigue leads to injury.
- Self-assess abilities and limitations on a regular basis.
- Install gates, doors and animal handling facilities that are easy to use. Use safety devices such as handrails and guards on equipment.
- Decrease the chance of falls by installing non-slip flooring and handrails.
- Ensure that tractor rollover protection structures (ROPS) are in place (retrofit if necessary) and buckle up.
- Get regular medical checkups and check prescriptions to ensure their use does not interfere with the safe operation of machinery.
- Work with others or, if this is not possible, make arrangements to have someone check on you at regular intervals.
- Keep in contact with a cell phone or radio.

Summary

Farmers over the age of 60 are at high risk for injury and death on Alberta farms. By acknowledging personal limitations and working with friends and family to decrease hazards, senior farmers can continue to work on the farm in a safe environment. The farm community, friends and family can take an active role in ensuring that senior farmers work in a safe environment.

References

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