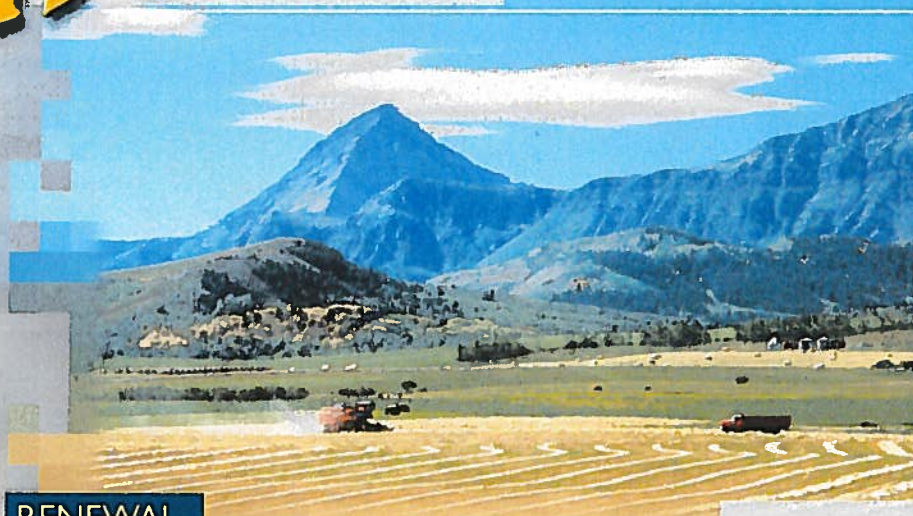


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Alberta

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SECTION 5: HEALTH

5.1 Health—Introduction (Video)

FROM THE VIDEO:

Farming is one of the most dangerous occupations in Alberta. And that's because farmers face a wide range of short-term and long-term health hazards.

It doesn't matter if you're just getting into the business or have been at it for 30 years. Once your health is gone, it's gone.

The important thing is to know what's coming at you, so you can head it off before it harms you. Get the job done, with zero casualties.

Don't do it because we say so. Do it for YOU.

5.2 Hearing Protection

DVD:

Many farming activities involve damaging noise levels!

- Examples: tractors, grain dryers, squealing pigs, radio in cab.
- Noise is too loud if you must raise your voice to be heard 1 metre (3 ft.) away.
- Prolonged exposure to high noise levels causes nerve damage. Permanent hearing loss results.
- Hearing loss adds up over time as exposure continues. It's never too late to take precautions.
- Protect yourself with acoustic ear muffs or ear plugs. Ensure proper fit and seal.

Many types of modern farm machinery and equipment emit noise in excess of recommended levels. Tractors, grain dryers and power hand tools are just a few examples. A barn full of squealing pigs at feeding time registers as one of the highest noise levels in farming. Even a radio in an enclosed cab increases the risk of hearing loss.

Prolonged exposure to excessive noise levels will result in permanent hearing loss. Noise can lead to fatigue and reduced work output.

Hearing is one of the most important human assets. Loss of hearing reduces one of your crucial warning devices.

How can I tell if a noise is too loud?

- You must raise your voice to be heard above the noise at 1 metre (3 ft.) from your partner.
- Your ears ring after prolonged exposure to noise.
- Speech and other sounds seem muffled after exposure.

- You lose the ability to tell musical tones apart.
- You fail to hear high-pitched sounds.

How does the noise damage hearing?

The damage caused by noise involves nerve damage, resulting in hearing loss. Hearing loss occurs slowly, usually over a number of years, and you may not even realize it as there is no pain. Once damage has occurred, it is impossible to repair.

How do I protect myself from hearing loss?

Depending on the level of noise, a variety of hearing protection devices can be used. Ear protection is available in two forms: acoustical ear muffs and ear plugs. Both reduce the level of noise entering the ear but will still allow you to hear your equipment running. Acoustical ear muffs provide the most effective protection against noise. A good fit is vital in order for these devices to work properly.

You can also prevent hearing loss by:

- limiting the amount of time spent near high-noise equipment
- installing or repairing mufflers on equipment
- closing all windows and doors on equipment

Finally, have your hearing tested by audiometric testing. This procedure will let you know whether or not you have already experienced significant hearing loss. If you have experienced some hearing loss, take steps to reduce any further loss.

All hearing loss is cumulative—it adds up over your lifetime. It's never too late to take precautions.

5.3 Sun Protection

DVD:

Farmers work outdoors when the sun's radiation is most intense!

Skin:

- Cover skin with loose, light clothing.
- Apply sunscreen (SPF 15+).
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat (not baseball cap). Neck, ears and cheeks are common areas for skin cancer.
- See doctor about unusual skin changes (cancer).

Eyes:

- Ultraviolet light can damage eyes. Wear "100% UV" sunglasses.

Heat:

- Hot environments can cause illness (heat exhaustion, heat stroke).
- Stay hydrated.
- Take hourly breaks indoors or in shade.

The sun can be very dangerous, especially to farmers who work outdoors when the sun's radiation is the most intense. Protecting your skin and eyes against the sun is important to your health.

- When heat is combined with other stresses, like physical work, loss of fluids or fatigue, it may lead to heat-related illness, disability or even death in extreme cases.
- Sunlight can cause a lot of damage, including wrinkles, sunspots, aging skin and skin cancer.

What can you do to protect yourself from the sun?

- Limit your time in the sun. Take your breaks indoors if possible, or try to get into the shade for a few minutes every hour.
- Cover up as much as possible. Wear protective clothing. Choose lightweight, tightly-woven shirts and long pants that are not too tight. Clothing should be light coloured.
- Apply sunscreen (with SPF of 15 or greater) on unprotected skin: face, neck, hands, forearms and ears. Apply sunscreen before heading outdoors, and reapply as necessary during the day.
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat to protect your head and face. Legionnaire-style caps (with a back flap) are also recommended. Baseball caps do not protect the back of the neck, the ears or the cheeks—areas where skin cancers often appear.
- Carry some water with you and take drinks frequently.
- Always wear sunglasses to protect your eyes against ultraviolet rays.
- Don't be fooled by the clouds. The sun's damaging UV rays can penetrate light cloud cover, haze and fog. These rays are invisible and they do not feel hot.

- Be alert for skin changes that could be cancerous: sores will not heal, moles change shape or colour, or unusual growths. If detected early, skin cancer can be treated effectively.

5.4 Respiratory Protection

DVD:

Protect yourself from long-term respiratory disease!

- Ongoing exposure to dust or mould spores can cause farmer's lung, pulmonary mycotoxicosis or TODS (toxic organic dust syndrome).
- Symptoms (delayed 3-8 hours): shortness of breath, chest tightness, fatigue, dry cough, muscle ache, headache, chills, fever.
- With repeated exposures, symptoms occur more frequently and severely.
- Prevent mould growth (control moisture levels in hay, straw, grain).
- Limit entry into high dust or mould environments.
- Protect your lungs. Wear NIOSH approved respirators (two-strap disposable, or cartridge type).

A casual glance may suggest that farmers breathe fresh, clean air and live in a healthy work environment. However, in the course of their work, farmers often spend time in environments where large volumes of dust and mould put them at risk of long-term respiratory disease. These diseases are caused by toxins, mould and dust.

A second respiratory hazard is infection with Hantavirus, spread from deer mice to humans by airborne dust particles. (See the "Hantavirus" topic for more information.)

Long-Term Respiratory Hazards

Long-term respiratory diseases that farmers can develop include:

- Farmer's lung
- Pulmonary mycotoxicosis
- TODS (toxic organic dust syndrome)

Inhaling mould spores in dust from mouldy hay, straw and grain can cause farmer's lung and pulmonary mycotoxicosis. Enormous quantities of mould spores can develop in stored grain, silage or baled hay that has a high moisture content. These appear as a white or gray powder in the feed. When the feed is disturbed, billions of these microscopic particles become airborne and are easily inhaled into the lungs. There, they can cause a type of pneumonia arising from an allergic response.

Farmer's lung and pulmonary mycotoxicosis are closely related conditions. Early symptoms are often ignored or shrugged off as a touch of cold, flu or asthma.

Since farmer's lung is an allergic response, individuals become sensitized with repeated exposures. The symptoms occur more frequently and with greater severity. For some farmers, this signals the end of their career. Long-term exposures can lead to irreversible scarring of lung tissue.

Symptoms that may follow mould exposure include: shortness of breath, tightness in the chest, fatigue, a dry cough, muscle ache, headache, chills and fever. Symptoms are usually delayed three to eight hours after exposure. The reaction usually abates after 12 to 48 hours, although some effects may linger as long as two weeks. (Consult your doctor or health professional for detailed information, proper diagnosis and treatment.)

A related condition is TODS (toxic organic dust syndrome). This is a non-allergic, inflammatory response that results from inhaling large amounts of organic dust from grain.

Preventing Long-Term Respiratory Disease

First Line of Defence:

- Prevent mould growth by carefully controlling moisture levels in stored feed.
- Limit the need to go into high dust or mould environments. Automated feeding or unloading systems may offer health benefits.

Last Line of Defence:

- Protect your lungs with the correct respiratory equipment, such as NIOSH-approved two-strap dust respirators and NIOSH-approved cartridge respirators.
- Single-strap "nuisance" dust masks are not effective protective devices against mould spores.
- Use the right respirator for the job. A respirator labelled for use with pesticides and herbicides will not protect against dust and mould spores. Similarly, a dust respirator won't protect against pesticides or welding fumes.
- Remember that respirators do not supply oxygen. A respirator will not protect you in a hazardous atmosphere (e.g., silo gas, manure gases, carbon monoxide).

5.5 Eyesight Protection

DVD:

Your eyes are vulnerable ... and irreplaceable!

- Place eye protection next to tools. If it's handy, you'll wear it.
- Prescription glasses can be filled with CSA-approved lenses.

Correct gear for the job:

- Hand and power tools: CSA-approved safety glasses
- Grinders: face shield and CSA-approved safety glasses
- Arc welder or cutting torch: welder's helmet with correct darkened lens
- Chemical and pesticide splashes: chemical splash goggles
- Protection against dust irritants: dust goggles

You can't replace your eyes! The two you have need to last your whole life. Take care of them! Eyes are very vulnerable to injury. One slip and you're disabled for life.

Always wear eye protection when doing jobs like spray painting, sawing, grinding, drilling, handling chemicals or working in a dusty environment.

Always wear a helmet when arc welding, to protect against the ultraviolet rays of the arc and from splattering molten metal and slag.

Use the best eye protection for the job:

- hardened hand tools: CSA-approved safety glasses
- power tools: CSA-approved safety glasses
- grinders: face shield and CSA-approved safety glasses
- arc welder or cutting torch: welder's helmet with darkened lens recommended by the welder instruction manual
- chipping welding slag: safety glasses or welder's helmet with impact-resistant lens
- chemical and pesticide splashes: chemical splash goggles
- protection against irritants (fibreglass insulation, blowing soil, dust from hay or grain): dust goggles

A pair of CSA-approved safety glasses costs as little as five dollars. There's really no excuse. Place the proper eye protection in a convenient spot next to the tools or work area, so you're not tempted to take a chance.

If you wear prescription glasses, get them with impact resistant lenses. CSA-approved prescription glasses are available.

5.6 Stress Management and Mental Health

DVD (1 of 2):

Managing stressful times is the biggest challenge for farmers and families!

Prolonged stress has negative physical and emotional effects:

- Stomach ulcers, back pain, headaches
- High blood pressure, heart disease
- Irritability, insomnia, alcohol/drug abuse
- Depression, suicide

You are not alone!

- Share the situation openly and honestly with family members.
- Help your neighbours and let them help you.
- Reduce the demands on yourself.
- Set priorities and accomplish small goals (repairs).
- Eat right, exercise and try to get enough sleep.

Managing Stressful Times

Difficult times on the farm can lead to feelings of stress, anxiety or depression. This can result in an emotional crisis and thoughts of suicide.

The stress that farmers and ranchers experience on a day-to-day basis can feel like "make or break" pressure. Know your warning signs and the resources available to help.

Warning Signs of Stress

Physical:

- increased heart rate
- rapid breathing
- tense muscles
- increased blood pressure
- sleep and appetite problems

Emotional:

- irritability
- emotional outbursts
- lack of concentration
- feeling jumpy and anxious

If unchecked, stress can lead to:

- insomnia
- stomach ulcers
- high blood pressure
- back pain and headaches
- heart disease
- depression and suicide

Healthy Ways to Deal with Stress

Share the situation openly and honestly with family members. Ignoring problems and hiding feelings can hurt your family.

Many farmers find it extremely frustrating that hard work does not always lead to success. You are not alone. Help your neighbours and let them help you.

You might be feeling "What did I do to deserve this?" Accept that some things cannot be changed. Learn to distinguish between things you can and can't control.

Don't use alcohol or drugs. Substance abuse can be an outcome of bottled up feelings.

Don't get stuck thinking the "If only I had..." scenarios. These will not help you and can lead to more feelings of frustration.

Give Yourself a Break!

While you may not be able to control the source of your stress, you can manage its effect on your life. Try these suggestions:

- Cut down on the demands made on you until you feel in control or if you find yourself with nothing to do, use this time to make repairs around the house and property. For some people, keeping busy is important.
- Eat right, exercise and try to get enough sleep even if that means taking a nap if you find you cannot sleep at night.
- Set priorities and plan to accomplish small goals. Keep a structure to your day.

DVD (2 of 2):

Prolonged stress can lead to depression and thoughts of suicide.

- Depression is treatable.
- The sooner you reach out, the sooner you will feel better.

Can you talk to:

- Family or friends?
- Spiritual advisor?
- Doctor for assistance?
- Community agencies (telephone book)?

It is a sign of strength to ask for help if you need it.

- Alberta Mental Health Board has a free, confidential Help Line: 1-877-303-AMHB (2642).
- You can talk to a trained expert about stress, anxiety and depression (yours or another's).

Despite your best efforts you may find yourself needing extra help. Prolonged and/or unresolved stress can lead to depression. Depression is treatable. The sooner you reach out, the sooner you will feel better. Consider:

- Do I have family or friends who I can trust and talk to for support?
- Can my spiritual advisor/organization offer assistance?
- Can I talk to my doctor for assistance or referral for services?
- Are there any other agencies in my community that can help? (Check your telephone book.)

It is a sign of strength to ask for help if you need it.

The Alberta Mental Health Board has resources to help. The Help Line is available when you need it:

- non-judgmental and confidential
- ideas and resources for handling stress, anxiety and depression
- help with identifying additional options for dealing with your specific situation

They can put you in touch with services in your own community. They have experts trained to help you if you or someone you know is thinking of suicide or experiencing emotional or psychiatric crises.

AMHB's Community Mental Health Clinics offer a range of mental health services covered by Alberta Health Care Insurance.

AMHB Help Line: 1-877-303-AMHB (2642)

- toll-free from anywhere in Alberta
- confidential
- serving communities across Alberta
- available 24 hours daily, seven days per week
- access to mental health professionals
- crisis intervention
- callers can choose to be anonymous
- available to individuals, family members, concerned others and community agencies dealing with stress, anxiety, depression, suicide and other emotional or psychiatric crises

For non-emergency information, visit: www.amhb.ab.ca

5.7 Hantavirus

DVD:

Hantavirus is carried by deer mice.

- Exposure: inhaling airborne virus particles from droppings.
- Flu-like disease appears in 1-2 weeks (possibly up to 6).
- If difficulty breathing: see doctor immediately. Mention rodent contact, ask about hantavirus.
- Untreated infection can cause death.

Precautions:

- Control rodents.
- Wear rubber gloves and respirator (NIOSH P100). Dust masks will NOT protect!
- Use wet cleanup only (not sweeping, vacuuming).
- Soak droppings with disinfectant. Seal bag. Disinfect area.
- Wash hands and face.
- Wash clothing separately (detergent, hot water).

What is Hantavirus?

Hantavirus, carried by deer mice, can cause a potentially fatal illness.

Hantavirus infects only a tiny proportion of people who come in contact with it. However, people who do become infected can develop hantavirus pulmonary syndrome. Untreated, this syndrome can cause death in one-third to one-half of cases.

Rural residents in particular need to take precautions to avoid hantavirus infection.

How is Hantavirus Transmitted?

The main risk of infection comes from exposure to accumulated mouse droppings and nesting materials.

In Alberta, the only confirmed carrier of hantavirus is the deer mouse. (Identifying marks: reddish-brown or grey fur, but always with white fur on the neck, belly, feet and tail.)

Hantavirus is passed to humans when they breathe in airborne virus particles released from the droppings and urine of infected rodents.

Dry sweeping of mouse droppings in an enclosed area (such as a granary, feed room or garage) can release massive volumes of virus-bearing particles into the air. This substantially increases the chance of infection.

Precautions

Control rodent populations. Reduce potential rodent nesting areas inside and outside.

Keep rodents out of homes and work areas. Immediately trap any that get in. Seal holes with concrete or steel wool.

Do not use dry cleaning methods, such as sweeping or vacuuming, to remove droppings in an enclosed space. Use wet cleanup techniques only.

Wear rubber gloves when handling traps, rodents and droppings. Rinse the gloves in disinfectant (such as laundry bleach solution) before removing them.

Wear a proper respirator, especially when exposed to high levels of contamination or working in poorly-ventilated spaces. Alberta Occupational Health and Safety recommends NIOSH P100 respirators. Ordinary dust masks will NOT protect you from the virus!

When removing rodents or droppings, disturb them as little as possible. Soak droppings with disinfectant, then place in a sealed bag and bury or burn.

Wash all affected areas with disinfectant after cleanup.

Wash your hands and face with soap and hot water, or take a shower, after cleanup is complete.

Wash the clothing worn during cleanup separately, using detergent and hot water. Consider disposable coveralls (Tyvek) for cleanup of severely infested areas.

Symptoms

If a person is infected, the disease generally appears within 1 to 2 weeks, but can take up to six weeks to appear. Initial symptoms resemble the flu, including a fever, body aches and chills, but if hantavirus is involved, this can progress to difficulty breathing.

Persons with flu-like symptoms do not need to be concerned, but anyone who develops difficulty breathing and has recently been in an area contaminated by rodents should see a doctor immediately. Mention your contact with rodents, and ask about hantavirus. While there is no specific cure, treatment in an intensive care unit greatly reduces the risk of death.

More information is available from all regional public health services.

5.8 Enteric Infections

DVD:

Enteric infections are caused by organisms ingested by mouth.

- Examples: campylobacter, *E. coli* (some strains), salmonella, giardia
- Causes severe stomach and intestinal upset in healthy individuals
- For the very young, old or immune-compromised, can cause serious illness

Prevention:

- Good hygiene: wash hands, keep hands away from mouth
- Test well water regularly

Enteric Infections

Enteric infections are caused by organisms that you ingest, including campylobacter, *E. coli* (some strains), salmonella and giardia. They can cause gastrointestinal illness (severe upset) in healthy individuals. For the very young, old or immune-compromised, these can cause serious illness.

Good hygiene, such as handwashing and keeping hands away from your mouth, is the best way to prevent these illnesses.

These organisms can also contaminate surface water and well water. Regular testing of your well water (often available for free) will help ensure your family's health.

5.9 Other Farm Disease Hazards

DVD:**Tetanus:**

- Tetanus organism is common in soil and manure.
- Infection can be very serious.
- Booster shots are needed every 7-10 years. Ask your doctor.

Rabies:

- Rabies is life-threatening to all mammals. Coyotes, foxes, skunks and bats can transmit.
- Watch for unusual behaviour (wild or tame).
- Avoid contact. Take all measures to avoid bites.
- Immunize dogs and cats (common source of human infection).
- Immediately consult veterinarian if animal infection is suspected.
- If there has been any contact with a possibly infected animal, consult your doctor.

Tetanus

The tetanus organism is common in soil and manure. An infection can be very serious.

Keep your tetanus booster shots up to date. (Recommendations range from every 7-10 years. Consult your doctor.)

Rabies

You or your animals may come into contact with wild animals (coyotes, foxes, skunks, bats, etc.). Rabies is a very serious, life-threatening disease for all mammals including humans.

- Be aware of unusual behaviour in wild and tame animals.
- Avoid contact with wild animals, and take all measures to avoid being bitten.
- Make sure your dogs and cats are immunized. This is the most common source of human infection.
- Immediately consult your veterinarian if you suspect an animal is infected with rabies. If you have had any contact with the animal, consult your doctor as well.