



# Older Farmers A Growing Population

THE NETWORK: providing agricultural occupational health and safety information and programs to Saskatchewan farm families since 1988

**Older farmers have wisdom and experience that younger workers have not yet accumulated.** They love what they do, they feel a connection with the land and carry with them a cultural history second to none.

Large crops and livestock thrive under the care of the experienced farmer. Did you eat today? Make sure you thank a farmer whose hard work and dedication feed large numbers of people. We all live better lives because of their devotion to their vocation. Older farmers are able to use their experience and skill to compensate for decreases in muscle strength and reaction time inevitable with age.

**Current Saskatchewan research** indicates that older farmers are still working long hours. Farming is a unique occupation in that it doesn't have a traditional or mandatory retirement age. Other industries don't have such large numbers of aging workers. Because of this anomaly, research has focused on the age and health of Saskatchewan farmers with respect to their increased risk for injury.

Farmers suffer from greater hearing loss, asthma and poor lung functioning than other Canadian seniors. However, they report less arthritis, and are comparable to other Canadians regarding hypertension and heart disease.

Recent research indicates older Saskatchewan farmers have workloads similar to younger farmers and contribute to handling livestock and operating heavy equipment.

“On average, a 75 year old farmer still works over 30 hours per week”

**The following pages offer some information, tips and tricks to compensate for issues that might arise with age.**

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# Preventing Injuries

**Studies show that many older farmers are working alone at the time of injury.** The leading causes of fatal injuries are tractor rollovers, runovers and being crushed or hit by objects.

As we age we deal with physical factors that decrease the ability to perform routine tasks we have always performed before. These physical factors can include:

- Decreased reaction time
- Restricted head or neck movement affecting equipment use and vision
- Hearing loss
- Loss of balance and dizziness that can lead to a serious injury or fall

Sometimes it is tempting to compensate for this decrease in capabilities by using unsafe work practices or short cuts. **We will look at some alternatives.**

## Fall Prevention:

Falls often result in serious injury or even a hospital stay. Consider the following:

- Keep floors dry
- Apply non-skid wax properly
- Remove clutter in aisles and buildings
- Inspect the farm regularly
- Provide adequate lighting and make sure floors are properly cleaned
- Schedule routine maintenance
- If dizziness is a possibility, vertical climbing should be avoided completely
- Decrease the chance of falls by installing non-slip flooring and handrails
- Put non-slip surfaces on walkways and steps where possible
- Carry a walking stick
- Wear appropriate footwear with gripping soles
- **Be aware of your limitations**

## Are you Living with Arthritis?

*Use jigs, fixtures, clamps and vice-grips to compensate for the decreased strength or grip*

## Equipment safety:

- Trade in older, less safe tractors for newer, safer models.
- Retro-fit older tractors with ROPS and a seat belt.
- Inspect tractor lights, brakes, shields, tires, and so forth to make sure they are all functional.
- Never carry passengers.
- Limit tractor operation to daylight hours and roads with less traffic.
- Consider modifying tractor seats including installing better cushions, or installation of an independent suspension seat to help provide more protection and shock absorption for the hip and back, and use lower back supports.
- Add additional steps and hand holds to make getting in and out of the tractor easier.
- Never ground start equipment.



## Livestock safety:

Animals are unpredictable. Decreased abilities may lead to an injury.

- If it is not possible to install an automated feed system, use a feed cart to avoid carrying feed
- Install easy to use gates and doors in animal handling facilities
- Use handrails and guards on equipment to increase safety
- Have easily operated or maneuvered fence gates, building doors, and animal handling devices



**Considering the large percentage of tractor-related fatalities, it is imperative that senior farmers pay special attention to their ability to operate a tractor safely.**

# Your Health

**Older farmers are important to the future of agriculture.** Physical changes usually happen gradually over many years, but sometimes can appear suddenly. Changes in capabilities vary significantly between individuals. The key to maintaining safety and productivity is for individuals and their families to recognize these risk factors and modify the environment and work expectations accordingly to help reduce the chances of injury. Taking special care of your health and avoiding injury can help you to remain active and independent on the farm.

## Your Health Care Provider:

It is important to inform your health care providers about your work load and exposure to hazards. When recovering from surgery or injuries, follow rehabilitation instructions and only return to regular work when fully recovered to reduce chances of re-injury.

- Obtain regular yearly medical check-ups
- Consult with your physician about how physical limitations may affect safety and health at work
- Communicate with your family so they are aware of any existing conditions

## Pain Management and Medication

Work with your doctor to make sure that your medications don't interfere with the safe operation of machinery. Research indicates that the recent use of pain medication is related to incidents of injury. Reasons for this may be related to:

- Pain not fully managed is a distraction
- Worker in pain has limited mobility
- Side effects of pain medications such as sedation

Pain medication is not the only medication with side effects. All medication should be closely monitored and reviewed regularly by your physician and pharmacist. Many drugs have side effects such as sedation that interfere with reaction time, alertness, and can cause dizziness or poor balance.

# Vision and Hearing

## Vision

Vision decreases with age. Unfortunately, farmers rarely work with enough light.

- Increase light in low visibility areas.
- Always wear your glasses and safety goggles when necessary.
- Paint steps contrasting colours.
- Complete tasks during daylight if possible.
- Increase lighting levels in barns and other buildings.
- Ensure that steps, stairs, and handrails are tidy, safe, and well lit with switches at both ends of stairs and at



*Even if you think you have already done some damage, wear your Personal Protective Equipment!*

entrances.

- Avoid driving tractors at dawn and dusk when visibility is affected the most. The aging process can also decrease peripheral vision which may affect driving performance.

## Hearing

- Protect hearing by using personal protective equipment (PPE) and avoid further hearing loss.
- 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. Wear hearing aids if you have them.



## Fatigue

- Recognize injury risks associated with depression, stress, and fatigue.
- Don't push your mind and body past safe and healthy limits. Self-assess abilities and limitations on a regular basis.
- Take regular rest breaks, as fatigue leads to injury.
- Get adequate rest, eat nutritiously, stay hydrated and wear proper work clothes and footwear.
- Know the symptoms of heart attack and stroke.
- Don't do farm activity which may be risky for you.
- Get a good night's sleep.

Call the Network and ask about the *Sleepless in Saskatchewan* DVD and booklet if you are looking for a good night's sleep.

## Communication

Work alone as little as possible. If you do have to work alone, make arrangements to have someone check on you at regular intervals.

- Keep in contact with a cell phone or radio.
- Always let someone know where you are and how long you will be.



The Network has a large variety of health and safety resources available. Please call **(306) 966-6644** if you would like a copy sent to you, or check out our on-line electronic copies at [aghealthandsafetynetwork.usask.ca](http://aghealthandsafetynetwork.usask.ca)

Disclaimer: This information is intended to educate the reader. It is not a substitute for examination, diagnosis, and medical care provided by a licensed and qualified health professional.

*A Reference list is available upon request.*

Prepared by: Bonita Mechor, BA, B.Ed  
Reviewed by: Louise Hagel, RN, MSc  
Niels Koehncke, MD, MSc



The Agricultural Health and Safety Network  
Canadian Centre for Health and Safety in Agriculture  
University of Saskatchewan  
Box 120, Royal University Hospital  
103 Hospital Drive  
Saskatoon, SK  
S7N 0W8  
Telephone: **(306) 966-6644**  
Website: [aghealthandsafetynetwork.usask.ca](http://aghealthandsafetynetwork.usask.ca)

