

Winter brings compounding fall risks

By Mandy Archer, Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health

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Farmers working at heights are at risk of falls. The risk increases in the winter when ice can accumulate.

Photo courtesy CSCASH.

My friend's aunt fell this past Halloween after slipping on her entryway rug.

Her family began to notice spells of confusion and long bouts of sleeping, so they scheduled a doctor's appointment.

About a month later, she fell again. She was using a step ladder and broke her wrist on impact with the kitchen floor.

When they finally had their scheduled doctor's appointment, her family discovered she had a brain bleed. The bleed started with her original fall in October and had continued to grow since. Without going to the doctor, she would not have known she needed life-saving surgery.

The surgery went on without a hitch. However, my friend later told me that he didn't even know his aunt hit her head because she did not tell him about it — whether from downplaying the incident or because she did not remember what occurred.

And this all transpired without stepping outside. Add black ice and decreased visibility from snow and early sunsets synonymous with winter, and the risk increases.

Now, let's talk about the compounded factors involved.

This story could have taken place at any time of year due to the ordinary indoor hazards she faced.

First, her age factored into this fall, and age is an extremely important piece of the puzzle. She happens to be over age 60, and for farmers 55

years or older, you are 1.6 times more likely to go to the emergency room due to falling.

At 65 years and older, one in four older adults fall every year. Ultimately, the older you are, the more serious an outcome from a fall will be.

Age, plus the fact that she had fallen before, increased her risk of falling. Falling once increases the likelihood of another fall within that year. You are twice as likely to fall again after a fall.

In this case, it is likely due to worsening conditions brought on by the previous slip. Any lightheadedness or dizziness brought on by the bleed may have impacted balance and cognition during the period between the two falls.

Additionally, eyesight, balance issues, medications and certain chronic diseases play crucial roles in fall outcomes.

Furthermore, it is commonplace to avoid doctors after a seemingly trivial tumble. The CDC says less than half of people will tell their doctor when they fall.

Open dialogue with your care provider will help with the medication piece. If you are on four or more prescription medications, you are at an increased risk.

There are quite a few categories of medications that are addressed in the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health's "Ag Health 101 Unit 9: Falls on Farms," which you can find at bit.ly/4gDjyVV.

For a farmer, falls occur in the home as well as when dealing with the numerous hazards on the farm. Take into account outdoor conditions

when working on roofs, and exercise caution on other elevated platforms like hay lofts or truck decks.

Exiting tractors correctly is a simple step that could circumvent disaster. Make sure to face the tractor and never jump off the steps when exiting the vehicle.

Uneven ground or debris could become dangerous.

Not only that, but large animals can knock you to the ground quickly.

This brings us to a factor unique to the chilly season — ice. Although it can feel like there is nothing to be done, there are some habits farmers can heed to smoothly transition into the cold months.

First, preparing for snow and ice must happen before snowfall hits the ground. This means preparing winter clothing, deicing products and ice grips for your shoes and replacing them if need be.

Also, look around the outdoor areas that were slippery last year. Use this time to install handrails or fix drains if there are spots where ice is likely.

You should even walk differently on ice. Take your hands out of your pockets and shuffle your steps, or what they call “walking like a penguin.”

Last, dress like you will be out in the snow for longer than you expect. It is tempting to run out to get the mail or to go to the shed and run quickly back in, but if that fall happens, your quick run could turn into hours in the cold.

Proper clothing includes gloves, things like spikes or crampons for your shoes, and even a bigger, puffy coat to pad a fall. Tell others

where you are headed before going outside and always bring your cellphone or radio with you to call back for help.

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