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Basic skills, technique can reduce chainsaw risk

By Brandi Janssen

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Good technique will reduce the risk of catastrophic injury from the saw, as well as the more mundane aches, pains, and strains that can come from repetitive motions and awkward postures.

Photo courtesy Bur Oak Land Trust

In spring of 2022, I took a weekend-long chainsaw workshop hosted by the Bur Oak Land Trust in eastern Iowa. We met at the Indian Creek Nature Center and the workshop included both classroom instruction and hands-on training to improve technique and safety when operating a chain saw.

Bur Oak Trust executive director Jason Taylor recounted a story that has stayed with me. After the derecho in late summer 2020, he stopped into City Tractor Co. in North Liberty. The dealer was completely sold out of chainsaws, as many residents in eastern Iowa mobilized to clean up their yards, properties, and neighborhoods. Jason thought to ask how many pairs of protective chaps had been sold. The answer: zero.

The CDC reports that about 36,000 people are injured using chainsaws each year. Not surprisingly, these numbers increase following a natural disaster, such as a hurricane or windstorm. The fact that often chainsaws are often sold to inexperienced users, with no accompanying personal protective equipment (PPE), is distressing to say the least.

Chainsaws are a basic tool on any farm or acreage and they especially tend to get a lot of use by those who heat with wood or need to keep fence lines clear. But just because they're common doesn't mean they are not hazardous, as the CDC injury rates show. Take some basic precautions to ensure that you do not become one of the statistics.

First, invest in the right PPE. When I want to learn how to do something better, I look to the professionals. A professional sawyer would never saw without chaps, gloves, hearing and eye protection, and a helmet. You can find chaps in a variety of weights and lengths, depending on your needs. Most importantly, they should provide coverage for your left upper thigh, the most common location for injury. A helmet will help protect you in case of a "widow maker," an unexpected falling branch, as well as provide some protection from the chainsaw if it kicks back and upward.

As with any piece of equipment, good maintenance also improves safety. Review the manufacturer's manual and regularly sharpen the chain and top off the bar oil before each use. Also, check the chain tension before each use, and during breaks if you are sawing for a long period of time. Keeping the chain sharp and the bar well lubricated will improve the ease of sawing, which will lessen your fatigue level. Correct chain tension is important to reduce the risk of throwing the chain off the bar while sawing.

Good technique will reduce the risk of catastrophic injury from the saw, as well as the more mundane aches, pains, and strains that can come from repetitive motions and awkward postures. Consider your stance as you approach a log, set your feet shoulder width apart and bend your knees slightly to improve stability and balance. Always cut at waist level or below, never over your head, to maintain good control over the saw.

Don't forget about your grip, especially the "thumb grip." Wrap your hands completely around the handles to improve your control over the saw. In particular, wrap the thumb of your left hand firmly under the front handle to improve control and reduce the chance of a kickback. This grip also allows you to smoothly rotate your left hand to engage the chain break between cuts.

Remember that every time you make a cut on a downed tree, log, or brush, things can shift, which can change the cutting environment. Beware of hazards on the ground on all sides, as well as those above. Pay particular attention to "spring poles," where a tree or branch is trapped under a log you are cutting. A sudden release of the tension on even a small tree can cause injury or death to you or a bystander.

It's best to have a partner when sawing. One person is designated as the "swamper," who moves debris, keeps the cutting area clear, and watches for hazards. The other person, the sawyer, focuses on chainsaw operation. If you have to saw alone, make sure that someone knows where you will be and keep in regular contact with them. While

many agricultural injuries are due to crushing, which does not result in a lot of blood loss, a chainsaw injury can cause catastrophic bleeding. A trail kit that includes a tourniquet should be part of your standard equipment.

A short article is not enough space to provide all the necessary details of chainsaw safety. The Bur Oak Chainsaw Academy participants included novices as well as life-long chainsaw users and every person still learned something about technique and safety. Several experienced users commented on all the things they had been doing wrong for many years, putting themselves at risk. For those in eastern Iowa, there are two upcoming Chainsaw Academy weekends. The first is April 1-2 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. each day at Kent Park, and the second is specifically for women from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., May 6-7 also at Kent Park. Visit www.buroaklandtrust.org for more details.

Whether you attend or not, take some time to improve your skills to ensure your own safety as you fill your wood box and keep your fences clear.

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