

Iowa Farmer Today

Think about spring training before spring planting begins

By Brandi Janssen

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Spring planting brings a heavier physical workload. Think about how to improve your physical health this season.

Photo courtesy of DeAnn Scott-Harp

If your job has ever caused you an achy back, sore shoulders or a creaky knee, you're not alone. Work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are incredibly common and are a leading cause of pain and disability in the workplace.

Research on work-related MSDs shows that farmers and farm workers have higher rates than workers in other industries.

Farmers already know this all too well; so do the health care professionals who work in rural areas and see them in their offices. Tony Gallo, a physical therapist at Grinnell (Iowa) Regional Medical Center, says, "Practicing in a small, rural town, I see a lot of farmers in my practice. And a lot of people I should be seeing that I don't see!"

Gallo spoke to farmers earlier this year at the annual Practical Farmers of Iowa conference. During his talk, he reminded participants that they have to allow recovery time for their bodies, just as they do for their cropland.

Among farmers, he most often sees issues in the shoulders, hips, knees, and lower back.

"With farmers, there is usually a cumulative issue with joint pain and they usually don't come in until the last possible moment," Gallo says.

The repeated twisting and lifting that occurs on a normal day on the farm, in addition to long durations in an awkward posture while working on or operating equipment, can cause wear and tear on tendons, joints and muscles.

"The prolonged sitting can be an issue, but most of the time it is other manual labor tasks that decrease their tolerance for riding in a tractor," Gallo says. "Repetitive activities, such as lifting multiple seed

bags, can be problematic. Farmers' repetitive tasks would be stressful for anyone."

Researchers at Ohio State University Extension have specific recommendations related to lifting. They suggest avoiding lifting items from the floor to over the shoulder level, and lifting close to the body when possible. They also suggest investing in a utility cart or dolly to move heavy objects more than a few feet.

Gallo also points out that changes in farm labor over time have contributed to some of these issues, especially as families have become smaller and there are fewer people engaged in regular farm work.

"Farmers find themselves compromised when they have a two-person task and they are the only one there to get the job done," he said. "That's when excessive wear and tear occurs to the body and opens the pain for other issues."

Although it may seem like you should strengthen and exercise muscles or joints that are weak or sore, Gallo also cautions about over exertion when experiencing pain.

"Most often farmers, and many others, will go by the philosophy of 'no pain, no gain' to a joint that is already compromised and painful," he says. "Just like any piece of machinery, sometimes it needs to go to the shop for service."

Instead of immediately turning to strengthening exercises, Gallo recommends that you first ensure that you have full range of comfortable motion.

As we move into the busy spring season, now is a good time to think about your physical fitness and readiness for the work to come. Gallo takes an example from another all-American activity.

“Right now, in various warm places, professional baseball players are undergoing a ritual known as spring training,” he said. “They are preparing their bodies for a grueling, long season of wear and tear on their bodies. My question to farmers is: How much have you done to prepare yourself for your upcoming season?”

Being strong and in good cardiovascular shape will help you prepare for the season. But, Gallo advises a moderate approach. Heavy amounts of lifting or force may just cause additional stress to your body.

Gallo also recommends focusing strengthening exercises on the core muscles, which are those that surround your trunk and pelvis. Improving strength and mobility in the core can help improve overall range of motion and stability.

But, if your pain increases after core strengthening, Gallo advises that you see your doctor.

Remember that you are a resource on your farm that is just as important as your equipment, pasture and cropland.

“Just like it is very inconvenient when a tractor or other piece of machinery breaks down, it would be very inconvenient for your body to break down,” Gallo says. “The better you take care of the vessel, the better prepared it is to handle the rigors of the job.”

For links to Gallo’s PFI presentation and additional information about physical health and farming, go to www.i-cash.org.

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