

Iowa Farmer Today

Keep your body feeling good to farm at your best

By Tabitha Kuehn

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Proper form, stretching and strengthening exercises, properly adjusted equipment and periodic breaks can all help prevent musculoskeletal injuries on the farm.

Photo courtesy I-CASH

When I speak with people about agricultural injuries, one cause of injury that always comes up is complacency — the farmer has “done this a thousand times.”

They get in a rush because it is a familiar task, and a safety precaution is forgotten or skipped to save time.

It is also important to acknowledge that just doing the same thing over and over can pose injury risk as well.

Musculoskeletal injuries refer to any damage or strain on the muscles, tendons, ligaments, and bones. With hours of repetitive motions, heavy lifting and tasks that often require bending, twisting and reaching, it's no surprise that farmers' bodies feel the effects.

The most common musculoskeletal injuries farmers may experience are back pain, shoulder strain and joint issues like tendonitis. These injuries don't happen overnight. They build up over time.

Musculoskeletal issues can often be glossed over when considering agricultural injuries. When people hear carpal tunnel, they think about office work, not farming. But whether it's from repetitive tasks or awkward positions, these injuries can sideline even the toughest farmer.

Whole body vibration can also cause musculoskeletal injuries. Ever spend hours on the tractor, bouncing over rough terrain? That's whole-body vibration in action. While tractors, combines and ATVs make farming easier, they can also cause strain on your lower back, spine and legs over time.

Prolonged exposure to whole body vibration is linked to an increased risk of musculoskeletal injuries, particularly in the lower back and spine. The constant vibration can cause muscles to tighten up and joints to take a beating.

Different pieces of farming equipment have different time-limit recommendations to avoid reaching the whole-body vibration daily exposure maximums. ATVs have the shortest, reaching recommended whole body vibration limits in less than 4 hours. The limit for tractors is a little under 6 hours, and thankfully the limit for combines is well over 8 hours before most people are at risk for effects.

There are other steps farmers should take to minimize their risk. Tractors and equipment seats should be adjusted to fit the operator's body; seats should be comfortable and offer support.

Tires should be inflated to equipment specifications, and vehicle suspension should be maintained to manufacturer standards. When possible, it is best to avoid rough terrain, and if not possible, operators should slow down. Periodic breaks are also beneficial.

When it comes to preventing injuries, ergonomics — the practice of designing tasks and equipment to fit your body — is key.

For example, bending over to lift a heavy bale of hay or working for hours with tools that aren't the right size for your hands can lead to strain over time.

When you're lifting something heavy, use your legs, not your back. Keep your back straight, bend your knees and squat to lift. When working with equipment like a tractor, make sure your seat and steering wheel are positioned comfortably so you don't have to twist or strain to reach them.

When equipment starts to feel awkward or uncomfortable, it might be time to adjust it.

And remember, as bodies and abilities change, how you use equipment can change as well. Small changes, like switching to an ergonomic tool or fixing the suspension on the tractor seat, can make a big difference in how your body feels at the end of the day.

A few minutes of stretching and strengthening exercises every day can go a long way in preventing injuries. Stretching helps keep your muscles flexible, which can prevent stiffness and tightness, a common cause of strains and sprains.

Stretches should be held for 15 to 30 seconds and completed equally on each side of the body. You can find more information about stretches recommended to farmers at tinyurl.com/5n6zw332.

Strengthening your muscles, especially your core and legs, can help support your joints and keep you balanced as you work. Planks and squats are strengthening exercises that can be incorporated to help farmers build a strong foundation for their body.

Consistency is key. Spend just a few minutes each day stretching and strengthening your muscles, and you can feel a noticeable difference in how your body responds to the physical demands of farm life.

Taking care of your body on the farm is just as important as taking care of your crops and livestock. The farmer is the driving force of the entire operation, and if you don't feel your best, you cannot give your all to your farm.

So, next time you're hopping on the tractor, take a moment to check in with yourself. Your body will thank you for it.

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