

Iowa Farmer Today

Safety Watch: Farming can be challenging after knee, shoulder surgery

By Brandi Janssen

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Doug Seyb of Donnellson, Iowa, oversees cattle feeding at his farm in April. Doug had rotator cuff surgery in March; his nephew helped feed during his recovery period.

Photo submitted

In 2013, vegetable farmer Andy Dunham was pulling weeds and came across a volunteer mulberry tree. He tugged slightly, and the tree moved just enough to convince him he could pull it by hand.

So, he squatted low and leaned back; the tree snapped and Andy unexpectedly stood straight up, hearing a loud pop in his knee as he did so.

The result was a partially torn meniscus — one of two c-shaped pieces of cartilage that act as cushions between the shinbone and thighbone. According to the Mayo Clinic, tears to the meniscus are one of the most common knee injuries. Sometimes rest, ice and medication are enough to allow a torn meniscus to heal; in other cases, the injury will require surgery.

Andy's knee did require surgery. And later in that same season, while playing with his daughter Emma, Andy twisted the knee again and had to have a second surgery.

For most people, a knee surgery is an annoyance that will require some time off work but no long-term difficulties. For a small farmer, though, knee surgery can be disastrous for the business.

Andy and his wife, Melissa, own and operate Grinnell Heritage Farm and produce organic vegetables, flowers, herbs and beef on 80 acres in Poweshiek County, Iowa. They sell their vegetables via Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), at several farmers markets and to New Pioneer Co-op in Iowa City and Whole Foods in Des Moines.

The biggest difficulty for the Dunhams was that Andy was not able to work in the field while recovering.

Like many fruit and vegetable operations, Grinnell Heritage Farm relies on a lot of hand labor. The Dunhams employ a small crew of employees. Getting the work done requires hands-on leadership, and Andy spends most of his summer days in the field working alongside his employees.

Melissa notes Andy was the only person who knew how to seed certain crops. It was difficult to try to teach his skills to a crew member while he was on crutches. Andy recounts that he was “hobbling around on crutches, tagging along during seeding to make sure the crew was using the right settings.”

The Dunhams conservatively estimate the disruptions caused by the surgeries cost their business over \$25,000 in 2013.

Farming can be hard on more than your knees, as Doug Seyb of Donnellson, Iowa, knows all too well. Doug and his brother produce row crops and beef cattle on their family farm. During the winter of 2014 and spring of 2015, he had rotator cuff surgery on both shoulders.

The rotator cuff is a group of muscles and tendons that surrounds the shoulder joint and holds the upper arm bone in the socket where it belongs. Rotator cuff injuries are common among people whose jobs require repetitive overhead motions, such as painters, carpenters and farmers. While often the result of long-term use, the rotator cuff can tear because of a single injury.

Doug had torn his right rotator cuff while loading pallets and his left while pouring bags of feed. The wear and tear on his shoulders from a lifetime of throwing small bales and hauling feed bags eventually caused his cartilage to wear down, which put stress on those tendons.

“My doctor said, ‘Just look at your skin, it doesn’t look like it did when it was twenty. Your tendons are the same as your skin,’” Doug said.

While recovering from his second surgery this spring, Doug had his nephew help feed cattle. He was able to walk his pastures during calving season.

“I did spread fertilizer; I could steer with one hand and run the controls,” he said. Doug is now fully back to work on the farm. The winter surgeries were an inconvenience, but he is glad he didn’t wait any longer to have them done.

There’s no way to avoid the physical labor of farming, but there are ways to prevent injuries to your tendons and joints and to recognize signs of injuries that need attention.

The bottom line is, if you are experiencing pain, see your doctor sooner rather than later. Continuing to work with an injured shoulder or knee can make it more difficult to recover.

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