

Iowa Farmer Today

Falls on any surface can result in costly injury

By Mandy Archer, Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health

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This typical winter field includes mud, snow, ice and uneven terrain, all conditions that can put you at risk for a fall.

Photo courtesy Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health

Although the winter weather has been mild this season, rapid freezing and thawing cycles during a warmer winter present the risk of ice under even the thinnest layer of snow. The risk of ice means the risk of falling, which can have extreme consequences for farmers.

In fact, falls on any surface can be hazardous and potentially deadly. Whether it be on ice, wet gravel, a carpeted surface or a slippery ladder, the risk of injury and disability from one serious fall cannot be overstated.

Falls are very common and can happen to anyone. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in four older adults fall every year, and falling once doubles a person's chance of falling again. In addition, 3 million older adults are seen for falls in the emergency room annually.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 20,460 ice, sleet and snow related occupational injuries in 2017.

Farmers should be aware that if they have a fall resulting in a fracture, their injury can take six to eight weeks to heal properly, and even longer if there are complications. This can be challenging if an injury limits the ability to take care of daily chores. If a farmer does not have other helping hands on the farm, they may try to continue working as normal and worsen the injury.

According to Michele Lilienthal, the trauma and burn program manager at University of Iowa Health Care and a registered nurse, fractures and head injuries are the most common fall-related injuries, and head injuries are the most likely to result in a permanent long-term disability. Lilienthal said that adults on blood thinners — especially older adults — need to be evaluated for brain bleeds regardless of the surface they fall on.

Icy conditions are often a contributing factor to falls that happen during the wintertime. Lilienthal said she can tell when there are icy conditions due to the influx of patients in the emergency room.

Lilienthal said one reality of falls is people may not be able to move after an injury and sometimes are not discovered for hours after the injury.

“That always hits me really hard because I grew up on a farm, and I just can’t imagine being injured and laying there for hours and hours before you’re found, and that can happen easily with a fall on ice,” she said.

Lilienthal and her team treat frostbite in the burn unit which can result from the hours outside without medical attention.

Bailey Rickels, MPH, is the adult injury prevention coordinator for the trauma program and a Certified Health Education Specialist. She advises people to always assume ice could be present on the ground even if you can’t see it.

Lilienthal and Rickels suggest to bundle up for the cold weather, even if it is just a trip to the mailbox.

“Bundle up to prevent potential frostbite, even if you don’t think you’re going to be outside very long, because if you fall or get injured, you could be outside for much longer than you anticipate,” Rickels said.

Other considerations for wintertime are using a head lamp if it’s dark outside, letting someone know where you are or avoiding working alone if possible. Keep your charged phone on you in an easy to reach location, such as a zippered pocket or purse, rather than the back of

your jeans. This helps ensure your phone is still within reach if you fall and have difficulty moving.

Overall, taking steps to avoid falls is the best way to prevent injury. Don't count on your ability to fall "correctly." Rickels said to try to avoid falling on your wrists if possible, but "no matter how you land, depending on your frailty and other risk factors, you run the risk of injuring yourself."

Lilienthal and Rickels also recommended the "Falls on Ice" episode of the FarmSafe podcast at tinyurl.com/mr3mauaz.

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