

***Iowa Farmer Today***

# Addressing dementia on the farm

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***Safety***  
**Watch**



**D**ementia is an issue that affects millions of individuals and their families, but when it comes to agriculture, the conversation around dementia has been far too quiet.

While memory loss and confusion are common associations, dementia encompasses a wide range of symptoms, some of which can be especially dangerous in farm life. As America's farming population ages, dementia on the farm is a growing concern that requires dedicated attention, tailored education and support.

Researchers Kanika Arora and Julie Bobitt at the University of Iowa and University of Illinois-Chicago are working to provide that.

Living and working on a farm adds a unique layer to the challenges of dementia. It's not just about forgetting names or misplacing tools. Dementia can affect depth perception, spatial awareness and even the ability to see contrast, like spotting the green ladder to a tractor that is sitting on green grass. On a farm, where large equipment, uneven ground, and sharp tools are part of everyday life, those changes can create dangerous situations fast.

While it's common to see older farmers working well into their 70s and 80s, farm families need to be aware of the signs and growing risks of cognitive decline that can start to show up in the middle of daily chores, equipment operation or livestock handling.

“The symptoms are varied, very multifactorial, very complex, and they come up slowly, you know... there are those kinds of things that you won't even associate with dementia, like oh, is it normal aging or is it something different or is it dementia?” shared Arora.

The range of symptoms paired with the possibility of lower medical access in rural areas can lead to many cases of dementia going undiagnosed.

Another unique aspect of addressing dementia in agriculture is the fact that for many, farming is more than a job. It is a way of life, a legacy and part of their identity.

So, when signs of dementia appear, families face tough decisions. Taking away responsibilities from someone who has always been in charge can feel like taking away their purpose.

But ignoring the issue can put everyone at risk, especially when that person is still operating machinery or working alone.

Most farm safety programs focus on physical injuries or mechanical hazards, but the cognitive issues of dementia present a more invisible threat. And most safety advice for people living with dementia is designed for houses, not haylofts or machine sheds.

To help meet this challenge, Arora, Bobitt and partners at Illinois Extension and the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health are launching a new training series specifically designed for farm families and rural caregivers. The program kicks off in July and includes four one-hour Zoom sessions.

The first topic that will be covered is dementia basics — what dementia is, what symptoms to look for and how it progresses. The second session will cover farm safety so participants can understand the unique risks that farm and rural environments can create for those with signs of dementia. The third session will cover changes that can be made around the farm and home to help mitigate risks. Caregiving and communication are the topics for the fourth session, which will aim to help the caregivers navigate the communication challenges they may face and find support.

The sessions include videos filmed on real farms, short quizzes and stories from caregivers who have been there. Everything is online, which was designed specifically so caregivers do not need to travel.

“This program was shaped in partnership with farm families from the start, and their voices and lived experiences are woven throughout the entire series,” says Bobitt. “It offers caregivers practical tools and reassurance that they’re not alone, that others understand the unique challenges of farming and dementia, and this program reflects that shared experience.”

The training encourages families to choose the safety steps that work best for them. Whether that’s changing routines, adjusting equipment, or using reminders and visual cues to help navigate daily tasks.

Arora knows that complete elimination of farming tasks is not a feasible or dignified option for many farmers experiencing signs of dementia, and she and her team have emphasized the importance of finding what works best for each individual and family.

“I think the innovation for this project is that it acknowledges that farming is a huge part of their identity. ... Work abstinence is not going to work. We want to help provide options,” said Arora.

Dementia on the farm isn’t just a medical issue. It’s a family issue and a safety issue, and continuous work needs to be done to best serve the entire farm support system.

To sign up for the upcoming sessions, visit [redcap.link/FFCD](https://redcap.link/FFCD) or call 319-384-3817. Participants are welcome from any state and must have a relative that shows signs of dementia that currently works or resides in a rural area.

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