

**Episode Title:** Falls on Ice

**Summary:** We continue our winter series talking about falls on ice, a common wintertime hazard on the farm. In this episode, an Iowa rancher shares a story about falling on ice and hitting her head. She lists the things she always does now to try to prevent it from happening again. We also talk to Kathy Lee, RN, MSN, from the UIHC trauma program about health outcomes associated with falls and strategies for preventing falls on ice.

**Expert:** Kathy Lee

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**Episode Quote:**

*“The hardest thing is just staying on your feet. There’s always hidden ice and I’ve slipped and fallen many, many times.”*

– FFA member shares about the hardest winter jobs on the farm

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## Transcript

**00:04 K. Crawford**

Welcome to the FarmSafe Podcast brought to you by the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. In the blink of an eye, an injury can change your life and your farm forever. During each episode, we share first-hand stories and real-life tips for making safer and healthier decisions while on the farm.

In this episode, we continue our winter series by talking about falls on ice, a common hazard on the farm in the winter. Our guest today is Kathy Lee, a registered nurse and injury prevention coordinator with University of Iowa Health Care.

**00:35 K. Lee**

Hi, so I'm Kathy Lee. I work for the trauma program at the University of Iowa Hospitals, and I'm the injury prevention coordinator for adults for the hospital. And so, one of my major areas of focus of course is fall prevention because it is the probably the highest injury, almost in every age group and certainly in older adults, it's a significant and actually the most major cause of injury and death from injury, so it's a high focus area for me.

**01:01 K. Crawford**

Thanks for being here today, Kathy! One of the things that we do at the Great Plains Center is collect stories from farmers in our region and they tell us about times they experience some of these hazards that we talk about on the podcast. We also hear from them about the steps they take to prevent injuries. And to start our conversation today, I'm going to read a story from Karen, a rancher here in Iowa, who shared a story about a time she fell on the ice, and she also shared the things she does now to reduce the likelihood that it will happen again.

**01:36 Speaker 1**

The temperature had dropped rapidly during the day after a steady rainfall in the morning. A depression in the pasture near the barn had filled with water and frozen smooth like glass. A light snow had fallen dusting the ice, hiding it from view.

As is typical in winter, I was doing chores after dark. I had filled the outdoor water tank and stepped outside to drain the hose. There was no outdoor lighting, so I was working in the dark, but the night was crystal clear with stars and the moon, which provided enough light for me to work.

I stepped on the ice patch, and everything moved in slow motion.... like a cartoon. I felt my feet sweeping up so that I was stretched out level to the ground. I remember feeling suspended above the ground before I crashed down on my back, leading with my head. I was so dazed I could not get up or even try to. I remember thinking how beautiful the sky was and how crisp it was after a dreary morning.

Fortunately, my daughter was with me which was not typical. She ran to the house and got my husband who got me up and drove me to the house. Once upright I had an intense earache and pain behind my ear. He did his best to try and convince me to go to a doctor which in retrospect I should have gone. I was dazed for a few days and could not read. Later in the week when I went back to work, I tried to write a sign board and had no clue how to spell simple words. I'm guessing I had a concussion that was pretty severe. Psychologically, I am now nervous in winter on the ice. The fall was so unexpected BUT was predictable since I didn't follow basic fall protection rules.

**03:08 K. Lee**

So yeah, let's just talk about that situation. Especially in farm communities and folks that live on farms or even smaller areas or even have a big garden, or they have a few animals, it frequently takes them out to just exactly what you described which is like a surface that was you know, it could have been mud before, or mud plus grass. And then you know the weather changes, and it was wet before and now it ices over.

So, in her situation it sounded like it was pretty flat but lots of times it's a very uneven surface as well. And so, there's little ridges in it that can actually trip you much faster. It sounds like in that situation she actually slipped on the ice itself, right? So, she really slipped.

**03:49 K. Crawford**

And why are we worried about slips and falls? What are some of the health outcomes?

**03:54 K. Lee**

When an older person falls especially, they have very high likelihood of having a break, within that fall, whether it's trying to catch themselves and breaking wrists. If you're a person that does farm work that can be very debilitating for a while because lots of times, it's both hands right?

But also, if someone falls and breaks their hip. That's a really long process, not only surgery but rehabilitation afterwards, and can take them out of their work zone for a really significant period of time.

The biggest concern for me though, is an injury to their heads. Not only can that take you out of the work zone, it can cause a disability that lasts for the rest your life. It's one of the major causes of disabilities. Falls are. And when I say disability, I don't mean short term really, I mean long term, so that's something to really keep center. If you want to continue to farm as you get older, to avoid falling is maybe one of the most primary ways you can continue on with that work.

So, I like to always go back, circle back to that head injury because we want to prevent those above all things, right?

Just going through what else she said is that she fell and then she was dizzy and fortunately her daughter was there, right, and that she potentially that had a cell phone with her.

Now one of the things about having a cell phone— if you fall down and you have a cell phone fly further away than a few feet away from you may not be able to get to it.

**05:06 K. Lee**

Now, she hit her head, right? That can be a pretty significant issue. However, if someone falls, and say they break their hip, or even break an ankle, it's much harder to get up. It's much harder to right themselves. And so, it's so essential, and I can't, I don't think I can overstate this that you have your cell phone in a pocket, that is physically easily accessible if you fall, and not a pocket that it can fly out of and skitter away. I have an iPhone, and they skitter on a smooth surface very easily. So, they should be in a pocket that's accessible but not where it's going to bounce out of, or even a bag, like a purse, only cross chest, so it's not going to go away from you physically away if you fall.

And the reason for that is that if you have your cell phone, and you're still awake, you can call 911 and get help and have someone come out from the volunteer fire department or whatever it is you have in your location to come and help you get up off the ice and to also assess you to make sure you know you don't have a more significant problem.

And even her situation as she described that she had that that feeling of dizziness and dazedness and then went on to have some symptoms later. Especially in older adults, but in anybody really, there can be not only just concussion but there can be very small bleeds that happen in people's brains, even after a fall, even from a fall from standing, even in a fall from standing in a house on a carpet floor. So, it's really important to take that sort of thing seriously.

We have farmers in my family I know how they are. It's just really difficult to get folks to go to the emergency room, but in truth, that's the best thing to do. Go to an emergency room or a place that has a CT, it just needs to have a CT doesn't have to be a particular kind of institution, just they have a CT that so they can do a scan of that person's brain to make sure there isn't a bleed in there.

And the reason I say that is, let's say the person, they come in and they're a little dazed and they're having these little symptoms and so they go to bed because they want to lay down and may have a headache. Right? Well, the problem is, by the next morning they can have a significant enough bleed that they're going to have some real deficits after that. So better to go get it checked out, and maybe be monitored, if it's necessary.

#### 07:19 K. Crawford

So, let's talk about some of the things we can do to prevent falls on ice. I'm going to finish reading what Karen shared. Since her fall, she has made sure to take certain steps. She says:

**"I am out twice a day, every day in the winter for at least an hour or two. I now follow simple safety rules.**

1. I always carry my phone and make sure it's charged.
2. I always let my husband know when I am going out and what I'll be doing. We have a large porch that overlooks the out buildings and if he doesn't see me occasionally or hear from me he'll call me.
3. If the weather is severe I try to take someone with me if possible. If not possible I let my husband know when I am going out and let him know when I am back in.
4. I wear Yaktrax.
5. We live on a hill and the drive way ices up. It is asphalt so the ice is not always visible. When it is icy out I drive down the hill to avoid slipping and falling.
6. After dark, I always use my head lamp no matter how much light the moon throws."

#### 08:18 K. Lee

She's like an amazingly good problem solver and has come up with all the right answers. I mean she's doing a terrific job!

#### K. Crawford

So, let's talk about these things we can do to prevent falls. You already talked about the importance of having a cell phone to call for help when you were talking about head injuries earlier. What about telling someone where you are or even having something with you like Karen mentioned?

#### 08:38 K. Lee

She did some good things, she was with her daughter, which is great. If you can tell somebody you're going out that's always smart to do. Or if one of your neighbors knows you always do it at that same time of day, that's a smart thing too, because they'll know, and if you can have them on your cell phone in case something happens that they can come over and check and see how you are.

#### 08:55 K. Crawford

And what about the gear she mentions? She now wears a headlamp when working in the dark. She also mentions Yaktrax, which is just one brand of device that you can slip over the bottoms of your shoes and the spiked surface helps give you more traction when stepping on ice.

**09:10 K. Lee**

Yaktrax are great. The only thing is they tend to be slippery when you move inside, like let's say I have linoleum or something in my breezeway and so when I go back into the house, they'll be very slippery. So, if you use one of those products, it's the best thing to have like a little stool or something right outside the door that you can sit on to put them on and take them off. That way you'll protect yourself out there you know in the snow and ice or whatever, you know also protect yourself when you try to reenter the work area.

The other thing is if someone's on an icy surface, taking small steps is really important. Taking small steps can help that situation because you're less likely to, you know, have an unbalance within the swing of your legs.

Also, if you can walk on a grass or something around that's got maybe snow and ice on it, but it's a grassy surface and therefore it gives just a little bit more traction. Also having a little bag of sand that you can toss on the ground in front of you.

But she made a wonderful point in saying that she didn't know that ice was there. People should always assume there's ice there because the snow can easily cover ice. And especially that very thin layer of snow, because it seems, "Well this isn't even that bad of a snow, right? So, this is fine." Boom— now I'm on the ground because they didn't see the ice.

**10:20 K. Lee**

And that headlamp is a great, great addition to that. One of the other things is if you can wear bright colored clothes, let's say you do fall like in a field or somewhere where it's hard to see things, it can help you stick out a little bit if you have like a bright orange jacket or a bright yellow jacket. And if it glows in the dark or you know it has that treated surface reflects light easily that's even better. And her with her lamp on also will be very visible to other people if they're trying to identify where she is. So that's terrific.

One thing I wanted to add there too, and especially because we've had such a terrible cold and we've had a lot of wind chill factors that get into the negative numbers, people should be careful about frostbite.

Okay. And that is of course to dress in layered ways which most people on farms, I know, know to do, but just to remind themselves. There was, I think, a recent situation where a person ran to the mailbox, because it's really not it's not very far right? But if I don't dress just like I might be out there for a half an hour, and I run to the mailbox, if I fall and can't get up, I'm stuck until someone comes to help me.

So, number one, need the phone, right? Secondly, always dress like you might be out there longer. Dress for the worst possible scenario. In other words, even for a short distance, for a short trip, because frostbite can happen within 10 minutes given the right situation.

**11:39 K. Crawford**

We just did an episode about cold weather gear and how to dress to protect against frostbite and hypothermia and I'm glad you brought this up again in the context of falls. Because nobody's planning to fall so that's smart to think making sure you're dressed appropriately just in case something happens. Even just running out to the mailbox like you said.

Since we're talking about gear, I'd also be interested to hear your recommendations for footwear. We talked about the spike but what about footwear in general? Any types or materials that folks should look for or avoid?

**12:10 K. Lee**

Yes, actually people who were flat shoes, number one, even heels on boots can create more of a slip and fall hazard. Also, like really pointed shoes, they aren't particularly easy to walk in and that makes it harder to walk on any uneven surface or on icy surfaces. So, I would stay away from those completely.

There's a bunch of different surfaces on boots and shoes that are in fortunately we live in the Midwest so that real common and real available. So, they have a surface on the bottom, and you can turn them over and look at them, but it looks kind of like a tire right that's kind of what you want to be wearing in this kind of weather. So, if you have something like that, then you're going to be better prepared for if that turns out to be an icy surface.

**12:50 K. Crawford**

Check out the links provided in the episode resources section of our website which include a how-to guide Kathy wrote that includes tips for staying safe and warm in winter weather, and a windchill chart from the National Weather Service that shows how quickly frostbite can develop based on the current temperature and wind speed.

**13:07 K. Lee**

Listen to the FarmSafe podcast to join in the conversation about keeping safe on the farm.

**K. Crawford**

We want to hear from you. Share your stories about health and safety issues on the farm, about injuries that made you change the way you work, or about the ways you keep yourself and others safe on your farm. Also let us know if there are any topics that you want to hear about on the air. You can visit our website at [gpcah.org](http://gpcah.org) or email us.

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## Episode Resources

- [How to stay warm in winter weather](#)
- [NWS Windchill Chart](#)
- [UIHC Fall Prevention Overview](#)

## Photo

