

Joint Protection for Farmers and Ranchers with Arthritis

Arthritis, a condition that can reduce strength and mobility for completing routine chores, is a pain to farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers. Arthritis is one of the most common disabling conditions, and it especially affects farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers due to the physical nature of their work, which may include climbing steps, driving a tractor, baling hay, moving livestock, or bending down frequently when milking dairy cows.

The term arthritis refers to more than 100 different ailments known as rheumatic diseases. The most common types are osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, bursitis, and tendonitis.

Osteoarthritis causes the breakdown of the smooth, gliding surface of a joint, known as cartilage. When cartilage is destroyed, raw bone surfaces rub together and the bone ends may thicken and form boney overgrowth called spurs.

For farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers frequent lifting of heavy objects, repeated use of vibrating machinery or constant bending to perform certain tasks can add to the stress on joints and set the stage for osteoarthritis, particularly of weight-bearing joints.

Joint protection means doing activities with a minimal amount of stress on the joints, reducing pain, and conserving energy. Here are some practical joint protection solutions for farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers with arthritis.

Respect pain

- Pain that lasts more than 2 hours indicates joint damage.
- Fear of pain results in inactivity and loss of motion and strength.
- Disregard for pain results in joint damage and pain.

Balance Rest and Work

- Intermittent rest periods during the day may help to increase your energy level.
- Balance light and heavy work activities throughout day with frequent rests.

Maintain muscle strength and joint range of motion

- Achieve full range of each joint while performing your daily activities.
- Perform specific exercises and range-of-motion activities.
- Loss of range of motion and strength = loss of function.

Wear splints and/or braces

- Protect and provide rest to very weak or unstable joints.
- During activity, provide external stability to an unstable joint.

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Avoid positions of deformity

- Sideways pressure on fingers toward little finger.
- Flexion or bent positioning of joints.

Use Stronger Muscles and Larger Joints

- Larger joints can take greater stress than smaller ones.
- Strong muscles can carry a heavier load.

Avoid a tight grasp

- Don't carry heavy handbags, pails, and bags by the handle.
- Hold everything no tighter than necessary.
- Release tight grasp frequently if you have to use it.
- Use built-up handles on tools,
- Use manual or electric adaptive equipment to open jars or cans.

Avoid pressure against the radial side of each finger (thumb side)

- Don't rest your chin on the side of your fingers.
- Add levers to keys, handles, and knobs.
- Hold handles straight across the palm.

Avoid pressures against the backs of your fingers

- This occurs when you push up from a chair using a closed fist or rest your chin on the backs of your fingers. Use your palms while holding your fingers straight.

Avoid strong and constant pressure against the pad of your thumb

- The thumb is necessary for 40 percent of hand activities!
- Hold objects as lightly as possible.
- Use enlarged, built-up handles.
- Eliminate activities where possible.
- Type instead of writing with pen or pencil.

Avoid prolonged periods of holding the same position

- Sit if the task takes more than 10 minutes.
- Stand up after sitting for 20-30 minutes.
- Reposition yourself often.

Use Assistive Devices

- Assistive devices decrease joint stress.
- Activities are generally easier and less painful to complete.

Conserve Energy

- Utilize energy conservation strategies to complete activities efficiently.