

Senior Farmers at Risk On-the-Farm

Agricultural Engineering Extension: Karen Funkenbusch, Research Associate
Willard Downs, Extension Agricultural Engineer

Older farmers, ranchers, and agricultural workers deal with the effects of aging just like everyone else. At an age when workers from other occupations are enjoying the peaceful life of full retirement, many senior farmers are routinely exposed to the hazards of farm tractors and machinery, animals, confined spaces, chemicals, and other related farm dangers. However, the already dangerous work of farming can become more hazardous as farmers, ranchers, and agricultural workers age.

Aging is a naturally occurring process that has several important implications for agricultural disability, health, wellness, and safety. Although many seniors make some allowances for age-related reductions in physical strength, speed, agility, sight, and hearing, often many also resist the idea that they can no longer handle some of the routine farm tasks. In addition, many farmers suffer permanent hearing and arthritis which can seriously impact safe job performance.

Age-related sensory and physical impairments occur among many senior farm operators at various rates. Eyesight, hearing, balance, muscle strength, and reaction time may remain good for some individuals who are well beyond age 65, while becoming significantly poorer in others. Some individuals experience many changes over a short period of time while others notice gradual changes over longer periods. The first step toward addressing identified problems is to develop better awareness among senior farmers, ranchers, agricultural workers, family members, medical community members, extension specialists, and others of how sensory and physical impairments may contribute to an increased risk of injury for the senior farmer.

Generally speaking, reducing injury risks or hazards should be no different for senior farmers than for any other age group of farmers, ranchers, or agricultural workers. It is better to make changes to the working environment than to rely upon an individual's behavior around the hazard. Health and safety suggestions for the senior agricultural workers include:

- Increasing lighting levels in barns and the other buildings to accommodate vision needs.
- Ensuring that stairs and steps are well maintained. Stairways should have light switches at the top and bottom and handrails tightly fastened on the right side as you face down the stairs.

- Putting non-slip surfaces on walkways and steps.
- Having easily operated or maneuvered fence gates, building doors, and animal handling devices.
- Using properly fitted and readily accessible personal protection devices.
- Using extreme caution when operating equipment.
- Having your vision checked by a doctor regularly. The aging process also can decrease peripheral vision, which may affect driving performance.
- Remembering that vision is hampered the most at dawn and dusk; avoid driving tractors at these times. Also, be aware that older drivers' eyes need more light to see well but also, are more sensitive to glare.
- Getting plenty of rest during planting, harvesting, and longer working periods. Take breaks to protect yourself against fatigue and physical stress. Accidents are more likely to occur when fatigued and stressed.
- Drinking plenty of fluids.
- Understanding the medication you are taking and its effect on reaction time. Even, over-the-counter medications can hamper reflexes and diminish alertness.
- Making sure a family member or neighbor knows where you will be working.
- Knowing and understanding your limitations. Don't push your body and mind past its health and safety limits.

For additional information, contact your local Outreach and Extension Center or the MU Extension Rural Safety and Health Program at 1.800.995.8503.

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