Stress, Fatigue Are Major Farm Safety Risk Factors

It’s hard to believe but harvest time is almost here. During this time of year is when most farm accidents happen. Stress and fatigue are major factors in making farming the country’s second most hazardous occupation. Farming ranks second on the list of hazardous occupations compiled by the National Safety Council. So far this year at least two persons have lost major limbs due to farming accidents and most years someone is killed in an accident.

Research from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health ranks farming twelfth most stressful among 130 high-stress occupations. Farmers face a variety of stressful things, many beyond their control. These include weather and markets, both of which directly affect a farm family’s livelihood. These factors cause extreme stress because they are things out of the farmer’s control.

During the fall harvest season farmers work very long hours in order to get harvesting done in a timely manner. This fatigue along with physical and emotional stress increases the potential for an accident or injury. Farmers are often under physical and emotional stress during harvest. They are more likely to make critical mistakes, perform tasks out of sequence or forget important procedures such as turning off a rotating machine part before servicing it.

The extreme fatigue of long hours is another risk factor for nearly all types of injuries. Research shows that dairy producers were at greater risk for serious injury rises rapidly as they increase their work hours. During busy harvest seasons, it is common for farmers to work 100 hours a week or more, sometimes for several weeks straight.

While stress is part of everyday life during harvest season, farmers and their families need to recognize that too much stress can be deadly.

Suggestions for reducing farm stress and fatigue include:

- Take time to make purposeful, concrete changes to reduce farm hazards. It’s impossible to be stress free, so make sure you have backup measures in place. These include machinery guards, rollover protection on tractors and machinery lighting and marking for road travel. Tractor rollovers and roadway collisions are among the greatest farming hazards. Wear seatbelts when driving any vehicle.

- Take care of yourself. Get regular medical checkups. Let your doctor know how you feel physically and emotionally. Take the time to eat right. No producer would dream of putting poor, low-grade fuel in a tractor. Yet during the busy harvest season, we may eat junk food or high-fat food on the run, or worse yet, not eat at all.

- Use exercise and humor, which are natural stress relievers. Stress is caused in part by measurable chemical changes inside the body. Exercising (if your doctor approves) and laughter can interrupt these chemical changes and lead to a more positive outlook.

- Be extremely careful with your kids! Of Minnesota’s 15 farm work deaths this year, five have involved children. Make sure young kids have a safe, out-of-the-way place to play. Take precautions to insure that teens operating equipment or doing chores have the appropriate mental and physical maturity to do the job safely.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

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