

Farm safety - handling animals

Farmers and farm workers can easily be injured by livestock. Cattle, pigs, horses, sheep, dogs and other farm animals can be unpredictable and should be treated with caution at all times. Attempting to lift or push animals can cause injury and animals are capable of transmitting certain diseases. Plan ahead for any task, maintain a barrier between you and the animals and get help if you need it.

To prevent farm accidents, assess the breed, temperament, gender mix, size and training of your animals. Remember that both male and female animals may be more aggressive during the mating season. Make sure your workers are adequately trained and familiar with the temperament of your animals, and that yards and fences are well designed and properly maintained. Always wear suitable protective clothing (pants, boots) and use appropriate aids such as cradles and proper animal-handling facilities.

Risk assessment

You can assess potential risks in many ways:

- Walk through all animal-handling areas and look for hazards, such as broken gate latches, broken posts, restraining equipment not working.
- Consult with farm safety advisers from the Victorian WorkCover Authority – they may provide free consultations.
- Reflect on injury records to pinpoint recurring dangers, including less obvious ones like lacerations and sprains.
- Talk over safety issues with family members, workers and other animal handlers.
- Make sure at least one person on the farm is trained in first aid.
- Remember that inexperienced workers and bystanders are more likely to be injured.

Yard design, equipment and safety

General suggestions for improving yard safety include:

- Yards, crushes, cradles and sheds should be suitable in size and strength for the animals being handled.
- Avoid blind corners and sharp turns in the design of your yard.
- Keep the walkways and laneways dry and non-slip wherever possible.
- Make sure your gates, footholds and access ways are well positioned.
- Keep all equipment in good repair, gates moving and hung, latches working, hinges greased.

Cattle

Suggestions for handling cattle include:

- Make sure the cattle know you are approaching.
- Take care – cows may charge to protect their calves or if they are startled.
- If mustering during joining, use separate yards for bulls once yarded, if possible.
- Make sure there's enough room for the cattle to move.
- Try to work beyond the kicking range of the animal or close to its body.
- Use head rails, cradles and crushes to restrain animals when necessary.
- Dehorn your cattle.

Horses

Suggestions for handling horses include:

- Use appropriate riding equipment that is kept in good repair.
- Wear suitable protective clothing, including a helmet.
- Exercise a horse before you attempt to mount.
- Make sure that inexperienced riders aren't teamed with aggressive or nervous horses.

Pigs

Suggestions for handling pigs include:

- Keep boars separate at all times.
- Use a drafting board when moving boars.
- Use nose ropes and crushes to restrain pigs when necessary.
- Lifting a pig should be avoidable, but if you must lift a pig, sit it down facing away from you, draw it close to your body and pick it up by the back legs, making sure to lift with your thigh muscles.

Sheep

Suggestions for handling sheep include:

- Plan musters in advance.
- Assume that rams will act unpredictably.
- Use suitably trained sheep dogs to control the mob.
- Lifting a sheep should be avoidable, but if you must lift a sheep, sit it down facing away from you, draw it close to your body and pick it up by the back legs, making sure to lift with your thigh muscles.
- When shearing, use a harness to support your back.

Animal and human diseases

Many diseases can be transferred from animal to human through contact with skin, wool, hair, blood, saliva, urine and fetal products. Precautions include:

- Keep your animals appropriately vaccinated.
- Familiarise yourself with the symptoms of animal diseases.
- Treat any sign of illness promptly.
- Practise good personal hygiene – for example, washing hands and getting out of soiled clothing.
- Cover all cuts and open wounds before coming in contact with animals.
- If you come in contact with animal blood, urine or saliva, wash well with soap, water and antiseptic.
- Don't feed offal to dogs as it can transmit hydatid disease.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000) for an ambulance
- National Centre for Farmer Health Tel. (03) 5551 8533
- WorkSafe Victoria Tel. (03) 9641 1444 or 1800 136 089
- Victorian Farm Safety Centre Tel. (03) 5335 3717
- Farmsafe Australia Tel. (02) 6752 8218

Things to remember

- Animals are unpredictable, especially during the joining season.

- Make sure yards, sheds and equipment are in good repair.
- Ensure that workers are appropriately trained and familiar with the temperament of the animals on your farm.
- Take care when visiting other people's farms or saleyards.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

National Centre for Farmer Health

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