
Farm safety - falls

Summary

- Falls are a common farm hazard, especially for older farmers.
 - Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of falls to yourself, your family and other farm workers.
 - If you have health factors that increase your risk of falling, such as advancing age or a chronic medical condition, consult with your doctor for advice.
 - A health and safety officer from WorkSafe Victoria can offer information and advice on how to improve safety practices on your farm.
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Farm workers of all ages are in danger of injury or death from falls. Common hazards include: working with animals; riding motorbikes or quad bikes; working at heights in or on silos or on tractors, cherry pickers or windmills; tripping on uneven surfaces or falling into uncovered wells. Some health conditions and medications can also increase your risk of falling.

Falls are the most common type of accidental injury needing hospital treatment among farmers aged over 55 years. Broken bones are the most common non-fatal injury, with bones of the legs and arms at greatest risk. Compared to younger farmers, those aged over 75 years are more likely to die from a fall.

You can reduce the risk of fall injuries at your farm. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the danger to yourself, your family and other farm workers.

Risk factors for falls

Factors that increase your risk of falling relate to you personally and the hazards on your farm.

Personal risk factors

Personal risk factors for falling include:

- age – people 55 years or over are at increased risk
- a recent history of falls – having had a fall within the last 12 months
- mixing medications – taking four or more prescription medications
- certain medications – sleeping pills, tranquillisers, blood pressure medication or antidepressants
- eyesight problems – such as blurred or double vision, reduced sight or poor night vision
- balance problems – such as bouts of dizziness or light-headedness
- cognitive (thinking) problems – episodes of ‘fuzzy’ or unclear thinking
- certain chronic diseases – such as osteoporosis, diabetes, arthritis or Parkinson’s disease.

Environmental risk factors

Environmental risk factors are hazards in the farm surrounds that increase the risk of falls. They include:

- working off the ground – for example, on horseback, loading cattle and trucking decks, scaffolding, ramps, tractors or on the trays of vehicles
- travelling on vehicles such as motorbikes or quad bikes
- working at heights (five metres or more off the ground) – for example, on a silo, cherry picker or windmill
- moving around on uneven surfaces such as a sloping roof
- working and handling livestock

- tripping on uncovered wells, rabbit warrens, underground tunnels, openings or other fall hazards at ground level.

Reducing your risk of falls

You can reduce your risk of falling by minimising personal and environmental risk factors.

Reducing personal risks

If you have personal factors that increase your risk of falling, ask your doctor for advice. Be guided by your doctor but, generally speaking, ways to reduce your risk include:

- Exercise regularly to improve balance, strength and flexibility. In particular, perform strength training exercises such as lifting weights.
- Do plenty of walking on even surfaces. Wear a pedometer to keep track of your steps. Aim for about 10,000 steps each day.
- Ask your physiotherapist or doctor to show you exercises specifically designed to improve your sense of balance. Perform these exercises as directed.
- Have your sight checked every two years once you are over 40 years of age.
- Make sure your shoes fit well and are not a trip hazard.

Identify environmental risks

Workplace regulations require you to control any risk of falls from heights of two metres (about the height of a doorway) or more. Yet, many fall-related injuries occur from heights less than two metres.

It is important to identify every falling hazard and take steps to reduce the risk to you and other farm workers. Suggestions include:

- Walk around your farm and look for height-related dangers and other fall hazards. Remember that falling can also occur from slipping and stumbling at ground level.
- Add fall risks and safety strategies to your farm safety plan and discuss safety issues with your family and other workers.

Seek information and advice from a WorkSafe Victoria health and safety officer.

Improve farm safety

Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of falls. For example:

- Install handrails on equipment such as tractors, trucks and machinery, and along walkways, ramps and loading docks.
- Install steps to make it easier to access areas that are off the ground, such as equipment or buildings. When installing new steps, choose ones made from metallic mesh for better grip.
- Put non-slip mats or tape on walkways and steps.
- Check that ladders are in good working order and appropriate for the weight loads.
- Fit ladder rungs with non-slip grips.
- Use reflective fluorescent tape or paint to highlight steps, pathways and rungs.
- Make sure that work areas are adequately lit. Install more lights if needed. Solar-powered lights are cheap, reliable and don't need to be fitted by an electrician.
- Fit ground-level wells and underground tunnels with covers. Place warning signs around the opening to mark its location.
- Keep pathways and work areas clear of obstacles.
- Prevent injuries from livestock. Animals may shove and push you over. To help avoid this, assess the breed, temperament, gender mix and size of your livestock. Limit the time you spend in the same enclosure as livestock. Remember that animals are more aggressive during the mating, calving or lambing season.

Take safety precautions

Suggestions include:

- Use protective gear – for example, wear shoes that are comfortable, fit well and have slip-resistant soles. Choose shoes that lace up and have a zippered side. Lacing up ensures a secure fit around the ankle, and ability to loosen around the forefoot for wider or narrower feet.
- Use a walking stick whenever you travel over uneven ground on foot.
- Use a safety harness when working high off the ground.
- Be aware that quad bikes and two-wheeled motorbikes are prone to tipping. Ride slowly and carefully.
- If you ride a horse, quad bike or motorcycle, use appropriate equipment to protect yourself from injuries. Wear a helmet and protective clothes such as long pants, a heavy jacket and boots.

Draw up an emergency plan

Suggestions for an emergency plan include:

- Make sure there is easy access to a suitable and well-stocked first aid kit. Place first aid kits around the farm.
- Make sure that at least one farm worker is trained and up to date in first aid.
- Keep emergency numbers and a copy of your correct (official) address next to the telephone and in farm vehicles.
- Plan routes to the nearest hospital emergency department.
- Regularly talk through your emergency plan with your family and other workers.
- Make sure everyone knows what to do in an emergency.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **NURSE-ON-CALL** Tel. **1300 60 60 24**
- **AgHealth Australia** Tel. **(02) 6882 1486**
- **Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning** [Tel. **136 186**
- **Farmsafe Australia** [Tel. **(02) 6752 8218**
- **National Centre for Farmer Health** Tel. **(03) 5551 8533**
- **WorkSafe Victoria advisory service** Tel. **1800 136 089**
- **WorkSafe Victoria Emergency Response Line** Tel. **13 23 60** (24-hour emergency line to report serious workplace injuries)

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