Back pain is common among farmers because of the physical nature of the occupation. Farmers are required to do heavy lifting and a tremendous amount of walking, and utilize pushing/pulling to complete tasks. Back injuries can be chronic or short term. Once a back injury has occurred special consideration needs to be given to the spine, muscles and tendons to prevent a re-occurring injury. Common injuries to the back occur to the muscles, tendons or spinal column.

- **Muscle injuries** are soft-tissue injuries caused by over-exertion of the muscle tissue. Overuse and stress cause contracting and spasms of the muscles. Treatment should include ice, rest and light stretching.

- **Tendon injuries** involve repeated flexion or extension causing inflammation of the tendon. Pain and swelling of the tendon will develop. Treatment should include rest, ice and using anti-inflammatory medication.

- **Spinal injuries** cause damage to the spine, often involving the intervertebral discs. These are the cushioning spacers located between each vertebra. When the discs are damaged, the resulting pain and trauma is serious. Should this type of injury occur, the disc might bulge or herniate and put pressure on a nerve. This causes great pain in the legs or back and difficulty with the simplest of movements—even sitting. Spinal injuries are the most serious type of back injury.

Several measures can be taken to reduce the risk of a back injury. Many tasks can be modified to relieve stress placed on the back. These may include:

- Avoid working in awkward positions or standing for long periods of time.

- When changing directions turn with the feet, not at the waist, to avoid a twisting motion.

- Wear boots with high-quality insoles to support the ankles and reduce back pain.

- Use correct lifting posture every time. Use your legs to lift, instead of your back.

- When carrying items keep them close to your body and make more trips carrying smaller loads.

- Limit repetitive tasks and chores involving poor posture. Alternating this type of task with less strenuous tasks can be effective at preventing back injuries.

- Use long-handled tools to increase leverage and reduce the need to bend or reach.

- “Push” rather than “pull” objects.

- Carts and wheelbarrows are efficient when feeding animals or hauling heavy tools.

- When in the tractor seat, adjust the seat to position your thighs parallel to the floor.

- Consider installing mirrors or cameras in equipment to reduce the need to turn.

- Replace older equipment seat cushions with new ones that have adjustable lumbar support, arm rests and adjustable thigh support.

- Modify tasks or work methods to reduce the number of times needed to get on and off equipment.

- Minimize stumbling or fall hazards by practicing good housekeeping methods in all areas of the farm. This includes keeping tractor platforms clear of tools and clutter.
Healthy Habits for Preventing Back Injuries

- Tense muscles injure easier and cause more distress. Stretch regularly throughout the day. Manage stress to prevent muscles from becoming tense.
- Eating right gives the muscles the nutrients they need to work properly.
- Take care of an injured muscle. Don’t let it go. Treat a strained muscle with ice and anti-inflammatory medication to reduce swelling and promote healing.
- General aching is treated with massage, heat or Epsom salt baths to relieve some of the muscle tension.
- Incorporate core-strengthening exercises into your daily routine. Strong abs relieve stress on the back.
- If recovering from a back injury, follow the doctor’s or physical therapist’s recommended recovery exercises to prevent further injury.
- Understand your body’s limitations and ask for help when needed.

Managing Chronic Back Pain

The ideal treatment for chronic pain is a comprehensive approach that addresses a person’s physical, emotional and cognitive needs. The first step should always be to seek proper treatment from your healthcare provider. Other steps that can make living with chronic back pain more tolerable include the following:

- Learn how to relax through deep breathing and other stress management techniques.
- Set achievable goals and don’t overdo it on good days; learn to pace yourself.
- Engage in positive self-talk and reaffirm a positive attitude.
- Build rest, exercise and relaxation times into your daily schedule.
- Join a chronic pain support group.

- Know your medications, including expected benefits and side effects. When the “cost” exceeds the benefit, ask the doctor if something else might work better.
- Decrease or eliminate alcohol consumption. Pain often disrupts sleep, and alcohol can further disrupt the sleep cycle.
- Quit smoking. Cigarettes can impair healing and have been identified as a risk factor in the development of many diseases including degenerative disc disease, a leading cause of low back pain.

For more information on reducing sprain and strain injuries, refer to these Ohio AgrAbility fact sheets:

- Secondary Injury Caused by Lifting—AEX-981.1-10
- Overexertion Causing Secondary Injury—AEX-981.5-10
- Ergonomics for the Farm—AEX-981.6-10

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Bibliography


About AgrAbility Based Fact Sheets

These fact sheets were developed to promote success in agriculture for Ohio’s farmers and farm families coping with a disability or long-term health condition. AgrAbility offers information and referral materials such as this fact sheet, along with on-site assessment, technical assistance, and awareness in preventing secondary injuries. Fact sheets were developed with funding from NIFA, project number OHON0006.

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