



Don't Neglect Your Joints

Prevent damage to joints and make living with arthritis easier.

by *Kasey Brown*, associate editor

'Snap, crackle, pop!" When you're young, these words are usually associated with a breakfast cereal. Unfortunately, as you age, they may start to describe your joints instead. Even worse, many people just work through the pain and compound the problem. With some observations and an open mind, joint health can be addressed before a major problem occurs.

Arthritis affects about one-third of all adult farm and ranch operators, according to the National AgrAbility program's website "Arthritis and Agriculture," www.arthritis-ag.org. With the average age of farmers and ranchers at 57 and climbing, arthritis is one of the leading causes of disability in agriculture.

What exactly is arthritis? The term arthritis refers to an inflammation of a joint, but there is more to it underneath the surface. There are more than 100 forms of arthritis, explains Amber Wolfe, AgrAbility project coordinator for both the national organization and Indiana programs.

Signs of arthritis

She explains that the two main types of arthritis are osteoarthritis, which is from excessive wear and tear on the joints, and rheumatoid arthritis, which is chronic arthritis. Rheumatoid is actually an autoimmune disease, which means the body attacks itself. This causes chronic inflammation, pain and degeneration of connective tissue.

Rheumatoid arthritis is genetic, whereas osteoarthritis is preventable. Wolfe says osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis in agriculture because of the repetitive and stressful activities involved. "In agriculture, joints can just get used and abused," she adds.

Steve Swain, AgrAbility assistive technology specialist, adds that osteoarthritis

is not so much from a traumatic event, but rather, accumulates over time.

Some of the most common signs of arthritis are stiffness in joints, especially after a long resting period; limited range of motion; and loss of grip and physical strength. Wolfe says you may notice that you have trouble reaching the top shelf in the barn's medicine cabinet, or your hands feel stiff when you try to grip a pair of pliers.

"If you hear popping or grinding sounds, that's an alert that something is there. If it's consistent for about two weeks, then it's a good idea to get it checked to see if it's a short- or long-term problem," she emphasized.

Osteoarthritis can be diagnosed with X-rays and is manageable and treatable, most often with ice packs and over-the-counter anti-inflammatory medications, she notes. However, it can also be managed through diet, exercise, education and care.

Swain says that many times joints pop or creak because the muscles surrounding them are not toned enough to hold them together.

"Most farmers think they get enough exercise just doing their job, but we recommend walking and stretching to get muscles toned and to loosen up tight joints," he says. "If the muscles get tense enough in your back and neck, they can even squeeze the vertebrae out of proper alignment. Flexibility is very important."

Living with arthritis

Arthritis can be managed in some cases, but many cattlemen must just live with it. There are many ways to make farm or ranch work easier on your joints.

Wolfe notes there are two steps that go into living with arthritis. Initially, she says, look at the task and ask yourself, "Can I do this physically? What strain will be put on my body? Then, she says, ask yourself, "What kind of tools will help me get the job done?"

Repetitive tasks are the hardest on joints, so she stresses that cattlemen should let their joints rest more often.

Swain highlights some of the most common ways that cattlemen can modify their everyday tasks to care for their joints.

- ▶ Use a utility vehicle (UTV) instead of walking or running to do a project. "A lot of the time, we see issues with endurance. Most cattlemen tell me they have more aches and pains later in the day, and they can't work as long," Swain explained.
- ▶ Always use the steps to get on or off the tractor instead of jumping, and extra steps at the bottom can make it even easier for cattlemen with knee pain.
- ▶ Look at automatic hitching, he suggests. This can help you hook up the equipment without leaving the tractor or the truck.



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- ▶ Use larger bales of hay and move them with a spear on the tractor. He also says if smaller bales are necessary, then you could use accumulators to stack them behind the tractor.
- ▶ Automatic headgates in your cattle-handling facilities let the cattle go through the squeeze chute, and the headgate catches them for you. He also recommends that your facilities should be designed for easy cattle movement to alleviate pushing them and stressing your joints.
- ▶ Along the same note, automatic gates can alleviate getting out of the truck or tractor to get into or out of pens or pastures.
- ▶ Check the grain in grain bins through the use of a stairway instead of a ladder.

He says these are some of the most common changes he suggests when visiting ranches. His job as an assistive technology specialist is to visit operations once a farmer or rancher calls for assistance, go through a day in the life of the farmer and rancher, and recommend changes that can help the farmer or rancher in their tasks. Swain himself has osteo- and rheumatoid arthritis, so his recommendations come from experience.

The products, designs and techniques that AgrAbility professionals suggest are all archived in the Toolbox, in the left column on the website www.agrability.org.

Wolfe explains that a team of agricultural engineers has tested everything in the Toolbox, so they are not just self-promoted items by the manufacturer. Every item in the Toolbox has a description of the item, an explanation of how it helps, the source of the item and an estimated cost. Access the Toolbox directly at <http://agrability.org/Toolbox/index.cfm>.

Joint care when you're young

Arthritis is one of the leading causes of disability in agriculture, but it can, in some cases, be prevented. Osteoarthritis can be prevented if young cattlemen take care of their joints, both AgrAbility arthritis experts say.

"Don't try to do everything by brawn; use your brain," Swain emphasizes. "Most guys don't think about it until you get those aches and pains. Unfortunately, it takes those moments of hurting to rethink things. That usually comes with age." However, it doesn't have to.

He adds that when you are young, you think you are invincible because you are strong. For instance, young people often carry two square

bales of hay at once. Over time, he says, that affects your hands, shoulders and back.

Wolfe and Swain both suggest that young producers take a look at the Toolbox and see what could be implemented now to save some wear and tear on their joints. Prevention is the most important step in controlling osteoarthritis.

Again, they both recommend strengthening the muscles around joints and stretching to improve flexibility.

Arthritis can happen at any age. Rheumatoid arthritis has been known to show up as early as 25 years old, so Wolfe suggests getting checked out by a doctor when joint pain or unusual popping or creaking is observed, especially if accompanied by fever, sickness or fatigue.

"Get a proper diagnosis so it can be treated properly because there are many forms of arthritis. No, a veterinarian doesn't count just because they have access to joint supplements for livestock. Joint pain is different in each case, and treatment is different," she adds.

If cattlemen are smart and observant in earlier years, then they can prevent years of pain later down the road. By taking care of joints, the snap, crackle, pop can hopefully be reserved for breakfast cereal.

