
Know Your Livestock and Be Safe¹

John Beno, Charles V. Schwab, Laura Miller²

Farm operators know the dangers of working with machinery, the leading cause of death and injury in the nation's most hazardous occupation. However, many fail to perceive the dangers of working with farm animals.

One out of every six injuries on the farm involves animals, or about 350 of more than 2,100 injuries reported by Iowa farmers in 1990. Animals are the second leading cause of injury on Iowa farms.

Injuries identified with animals include bites, kicks, or situations in which the worker gets pinned between the animal and a farm building, implement, or other fixed object. The best way to avoid livestock injuries is to understand animal behavior. Only by knowing their animals, and what to expect in certain situations, can farm workers protect themselves and others from injury.

Animals without proper care pose more danger to humans than ones that are fed and sheltered. This publication, however, deals with animal behavior related to habits, social relationships, maternal instincts, and territorial behavior.

ANIMAL HABITS

Domesticated animals living under fairly uniform conditions often do the same thing each day at a specific time. Part of this is caused by habit formation, such as when cows gather around the barn just before milking time.

Habits also are caused by regular changes in environmental conditions, such as the temperature or humidity fluctuations when daylight turns to darkness. Animals are most active at the time of greatest change, such as at dawn or dusk. They will be least active either in the middle of the day or the middle of the night.

Learned behavior patterns enable animals to adjust to changes in their environment. Most animals have a variety of established behavior patterns that can be expressed when their environment changes. Animals learn to apply one behavior over another according to which one produces the most comfortable situation.

For example, a cow placed in a milking stanchion can react in several ways. The animal could try to break loose or stand quietly until released. Since only the latter behavior produces comfort, most animals will adopt that behavior pattern.

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 2. Prepared by John Beno, associate professor of occupational safety; Charles V. Schwab, Extension safety specialist; and Laura Miller, Extension communications, Iowa State University Extension, Ames, Iowa.

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SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Any animal that normally lives in a flock or herd can become lonely, depressed, frightened, or agitated if separated from other animals. An animal that normally would not frighten when the caretaker enters would become upset easily when left in isolation.

This poses a special problem for people who work with dairy cattle or horses. Cows left by themselves during the milking procedure can overreact to sudden movements or situations that normally would not frighten them. Likewise, an individual who rides a horse used to being with other horses may notice the animal becoming excited or frightened as time away from other animals increases.

Animals form social relationships with caretakers, too. Caretakers normally form a care-dependency relationship with animals under their charge. To feed and provide shelter for livestock, a caretaker must have the dominant role.

In caring for a dog, an individual may form a leader-follower relationship in which the human's actions are repeated by the animal. This is sometimes difficult to accomplish in other species, such as cattle or hogs, because of the innate behavior pattern of that species.

MATERNAL INSTINCTS

All domesticated animals have strong maternal instincts. Most animals show few, if any, maternal instincts during the initial part of the pregnancy, but change abruptly after giving birth.

For example, sows may appear docile during pregnancy. Their reduction of physical activity is influenced by the animal's increased body weight. But when nesting begins, or after giving birth, sows will exhibit maternal tendencies. This is shown by signs of excitement, and biting walls, fences, or people to seek an outlet. The sow's voice is lower, and when startled or crowded into a small area, the sow becomes aggressive.

Experienced farm workers may recognize these aggressive behaviors as maternal tendencies, even before nest-building begins. However, persons new to a livestock operation may not be able to identify and anticipate the animal's aggressive behavior.

TERRITORIAL PROTECTION

Domesticated animals try to protect territories as do animals in the wild. Caretakers may see this by an animal's aggressive behavior during feeding.

However, studies have shown that feed distributed in large, unpredictable patches will not result in territorial behavior among livestock. Feed distributed uniformly or in predictable patterns often results in territorial behavior, that is, the animal decides the area may be worth defending to secure access to the feed and exclude others.

To keep livestock from fighting at the feed trough, distribute feed in large, unpredictable patches. Avoid uniform distribution, or placing specified amounts in areas for certain animals.

Animals can adapt to farm environments but there are many factors that influence behavior. Study livestock and take note of individual tendencies. Understand which factors influence animal behavior and know what to expect. Only then can farm workers reduce the risk of injuries associated with farm animals.

LIVESTOCK SAFETY

How Much Do You Know?

Test your skill with this quick quiz.

1. Which action is involved in more agricultural injuries?
 - a. applying pesticides
 - b. handling livestock
 - c. using farm shop tools
2. Animals are more content when isolated from the rest of the flock or herd. True or false?
3. Sows are likely to be aggressive after the birth of piglets. True or false?
4. Livestock exhibit more territorial behavior when feed is distributed in large, unpredictable patches than in smaller, predictable locations in the trough. True or false?

See answers at the end of "What Can You Do?"

What Can You Do?

Handling livestock can be dangerous. Animals can be unpredictable. Practice these guidelines when you work with livestock.

- Avoid dramatic changes of an animal's habits.
- Be alert when handling animals during their most active time at dawn and dusk.
- Keep groups of animals together for better control.
- Maintain a dominant role with farm animals.
- Place food in irregular patches and volumes to avoid fighting.

Answers to quiz:

1-b; 2-False; 3-True; 4-False.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This publication covers only some aspects of livestock safety. For more information about working with specific farm animals, contact your local Extension office, or check these publications:

- *Basic Horse Safety Manual*, 4H-515, available from your local Extension office.
- *Animal Handling Tips*, Safety-14, Pennsylvania Extension Service, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania 16802.
- *Safety in Swine Production Systems*, AS-572, available from your local Extension office.

The Safe Farm series covers a number of topics related to agricultural health and safety, such as pesticide use, stress, youth on the farm, and fire prevention. For other publications in this series, check with your local Extension office.