THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

FACT SHEET

Agriculture and Natural Resources

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Working Safely With Livestock

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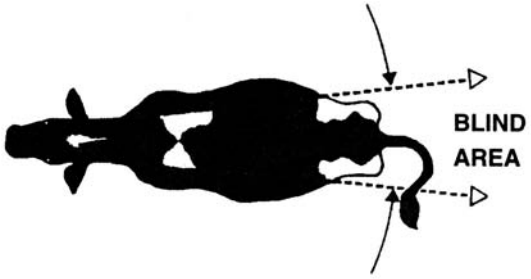
Many farmers have never stopped to consider why animals behave as they do and, more importantly, what this behavior may mean to their personal safety. Animal-handling practices are often inherited from watching others and from our own experiences growing up on the farm. Too often, this results in unsafe animal handling and restraint practices.

Although most animal incidents are not fatal, many men, women and children are needlessly injured each year because of a lack of safety awareness. Broken bones, crushed and mashed limbs, missed days of work, and unnecessary medical expenses are some of the results of animal-related incidents.

Individuals may work carefully around animals most of the time, but then are injured in an animal incident because of preoccupation, haste, impatience, or anger. It is during these moments that a livestock handler really needs to understand animal behavior.

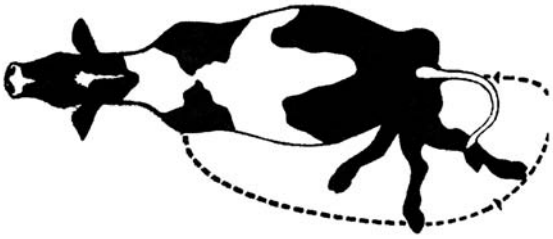
Beef, swine, and dairy cattle are generally colorblind and have poor depth perception. This results in an extreme sensitivity to contrasts, which may cause an animal to balk at shadows or rapid changes from light to dark. Sheep are also considered colorblind, but do have good depth perception. Instead, sheep have difficulty picking out small details, such as the open space created by a partially opened gate.



Cattle have a panoramic field of vision.

Cattle, horses, and mules have a panoramic field of vision, which means they can see everything around them except what is immediately behind their hindquarters. Therefore, approaching from the side or front can be less startling to these animals than approaching from behind. Horses and mules commonly kick toward their hindquarters, while cattle kick forward and out to the side. Cattle also have a tendency to kick toward a side with pain from inflammation or injuries. For example, if a dairy cow is suffering from mastitis in one quarter, consider approaching her from the non-affected side of the udder.

Livestock with young exhibit a maternal instinct. They are usually more defensive and difficult to handle. When possible, let the young stay as close to the adult as possible when handling.



Cattle commonly kick forward and out to the side.

Most animals have a strong territorial instinct and develop a sense of "homeland" in their pens, corrals, and pastures. They develop a very distinctive, comfortable attachment to these areas. An example of the homeland instinct is the well-worn paths created in most pastures and between pastures and buildings, water troughs, and feed bunks. Forcible removal from a homeland area can cause animals to react unexpectedly.

Considering these animal traits, it is easy to understand why animals often hesitate when going through unfamiliar gates, barn doors, and handling and loading chutes. In addition, shadows, yelling, and rapid changes in lighting can further excite animals and make their behavior unpredictable. Similar problems occur when animals are moved away from feed, separated from the herd, or approached by an unfamiliar person.

Animals are extremely sensitive to noise and are easily frightened or spooked. In their attempts to move away from the direction or source of the noise, and because of their colorblindness and poor depth perception, they may crash into or through objects, including people. Be cautious around animals that are blind or deaf on one side. They favor that side and can suddenly swing around to investigate disturbances. If standing too close, a person could easily be knocked down and trampled.

Young farm animals can form relationships simultaneously with other animals and with human handlers. Animals respond to the way they are treated and draw upon past experiences when reacting to a situation. For example, a newborn raised on a bottle or bucket may develop a very strong affection for the person feeding it and feel comfortable around people. However, animals that are chased, slapped, kicked, hit, or frightened when young will naturally fear being approached.

Animals are often said to be "stubborn" because they balk or refuse to enter an area. Once this has happened, the animal is likely to refuse the next several times as well and may become a little more excited and dangerous with each refusal. It is important to take the time to prepare for moving animals. Many farmers are tempted to move animals without the necessary planning and often end up in a battle with the animal that could lead to an injury.

In addition to unique vision characteristics, sensitivity to noise, and a strong territorial instinct, animals have physical and mental sensations similar to those of humans that can cause them to react fiercely to handlers. Animals experience hunger, thirst, fear, sickness, injury, and strong maternal instincts. They also develop individual behavioral patterns such as kicking or biting. The handler should be aware of these behaviors and take necessary precautions. Safety precautions include using personal protective equipment such as safety glasses, gloves, long trousers, steel-toed shoes or boots, shin guards, and a hard hat, depending on the activity and type of livestock being handled.

Handlers should also be concerned with zoonotic diseases, which are illnesses that can be transmitted between humans and animals. Leptospirosis, rabies, brucellosis, salmonellosis, and ringworm are especially important. A livestock producer can contract zoonotic illnesses by being bitten by the animal, handling an infected animal, or disposing of infected tissues. To reduce exposure to disease, use basic hygiene and sanitation practices, which include prompt treating or disposal of infected animals, adequate disposal of infected tissues, proper cleaning of contaminated sites, and proper use of personal protective equipment.

Facilities can play a major role in preventing incidents. Good facilities provide a means of controlling animals while allowing easy access for routine chores—all in a safe environment. To help prevent incidents, keep walk and work surfaces properly lighted and clear of debris and obstructions. To reduce the risk of falls, provide slip-resistant footing for workers and livestock with roughened concrete ramp and floor surfaces.

To Avoid Exposure to Electric Shocks

- Use a ground fault circuit interrupter with water heaters, power tools, and other equipment.
- Use moisture-proof fuse boxes, switches, and electrical outlets in wet or damp areas.
- Never use homemade electric fence controllers. Use only those approved by a recognized testing agency such as Underwriter Laboratory.

Electric shocks are always a risk when working in wet or damp areas of barns or milking parlors. Use splash guards in elevated milking parlors. Because leptospira organisms can enter the body through eyes and open wounds, use eye protection and gloves if splash guards are unavailable. All pens, chutes, gates, fences, and loading ramps should be strong and work properly. Man-passes should be provided to allow handlers to get away from animals in an emergency. If bulls are kept for breeding, serious incidents can be avoided by having sufficient bull-confinement and restraint facilities. Properly designed treatment stalls and appropriate animal-restraint equipment and facilities can reduce incidents or injuries during animal examination, medication, hoof trimming, dehorning, and artificial insemination. The risk of child or livestock drownings can be reduced by fencing lagoons and ponds.

Summary

Most animal-related incidents are the result of "people problems." Poor judgment and lack of understanding are major causes of incidents involving animals. Plan ahead to allow plenty of time to move animals, so there is no need to hurry. Do not try to manhandle animals when you are angry. Some handlers may exhibit a feeling of superiority over animals, which is foolish when one considers the size of some farm animals.

Other common problems should also be avoided, such as horseplay (people play), improper lifting of young animals, prodding an animal that has no place to go, tying a person to an animal, attempting a task without enough help, not providing proper and safe facilities, and not wearing personal protective equipment.

What can farmers do to increase their level of safety when handling animals? Although there is certainly no magical formula, common sense is a key ingredient.

To Reduce Exposure to a Livestock Incident or Illness

- Understand animal behavior.
- Provide proper and safe facilities.
- Protect against zoonotic diseases.
- Wear personal protective equipment.

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