

Noise-Induced Hearing Loss Common Farm Problem

People familiar with farming know that hearing loss is a common problem among older families. A lifetime of work near noisy machinery can ruin a farmer's hearing.

It may come as a surprise, however, to learn that the problem affects not only older farmers, but also young farmers and their families. At the Marshfield (Wisconsin) Clinic, doctors have noticed an alarming trend.

"Many of our patients with farm backgrounds who have significant noise-induced hearing loss are fairly young. And they are not just males, but also females," says Donald Hansen, an audiologist at the clinic.

"A review of our records showed that there are many 20- and 30-year-old farmers with 50- to 60-year-old ears," he adds. "And because farming is basically a family affair—the kids work, the wife works, the grandparents work—it's a problem that affects every member of the family."

To evaluate the problem more thoroughly, the Marshfield Clinic and the nearby National Farm Medicine Center are conducting a long-term hearing loss study of high school students with farm backgrounds. The study will focus on determining the extent of hearing loss, its causes and the best methods of eliminating it.

"Noise-induced hearing loss is permanent, irreversible and cannot be helped through medicine or surgery," says Hansen. "It is, however, 100 percent preventable. An important part of our study will be to educate farmers and their families in the use of hearing protection."

Noise-induced hearing loss is caused by extended exposure to loud noises. "Typically, loud noise affects the high frequency spectrum of a person's hearing first," says Hansen. "Continued exposure will cause the middle frequencies to deteriorate gradually, followed by the low frequencies."

Tell-tale signs of noise-induced hearing loss are inability to hear birds, crickets, doorbells, ringing telephones, women's and children's voices, or other high-pitched sounds. Another sign is the inability to distinguish clarity of speech in a noisy setting, such as a crowded room.

"A condition known as tinnitus, or continuous ringing in the ears, can also develop," says Hansen.

Usually a temporary condition, tinnitus can become permanent.

"Frequently, your ears will ring after you've been involved in a noisy activity," says Hansen. "That ringing in your ears is like a little alarm telling you to protect your ears."

"Your ears don't bleed and may not hurt," he adds. "But it would almost be better if they did, because then a person might be more inclined to do something about it."

"Fortunately," says Hansen, "doing something is easy. You can

either get away from the noise, which for a farmer working on a farm is impossible. Or you can wear proper hearing protection," he says.

Proper hearing protection comes in several forms, including earplugs and earmuffs. Disposable

earplugs, offer a convenient, low-cost method of hearing protection. Available at farm supply houses, safety equipment distributors, hardware stores and many chain stores, these slender, tapered earplugs offer a comfortable alternative to bulky earmuffs.

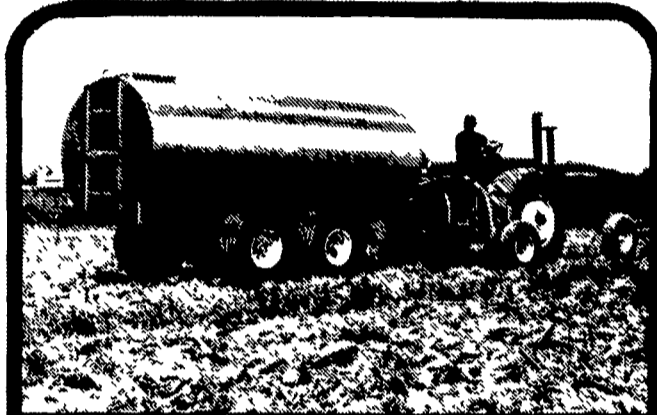
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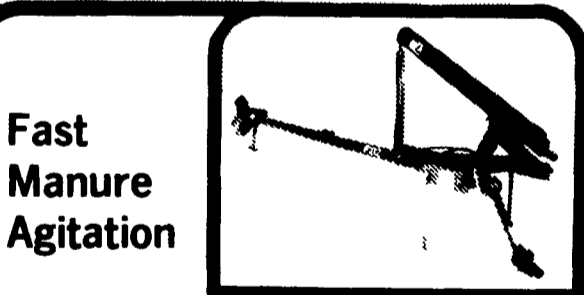
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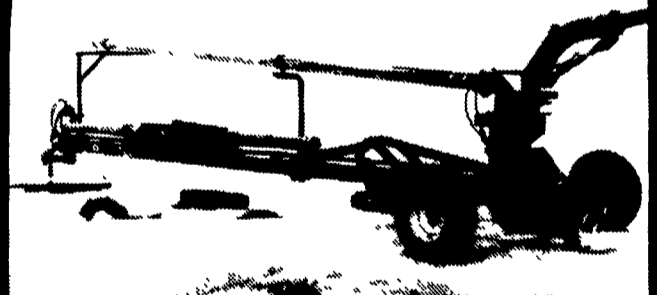
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