Breaking the stigma of hearing loss in farming

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Just about everyone in rural America knows someone who fits the description. A farmer — young or old — who responds with a "What?" whenever you say something or ask a question. You may yourself be that person. Often from extended exposure to loud machinery and noisy environments, farmers are at a significantly higher risk of hearing loss than the general population. One third of all U.S. farmers have some form of hearing loss, according to the Kentucky Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Lauren and Alyssa Roling know that well.

Hearing loss is common among farmers

"All participants had overexposure to noisy farm machinery and environments. Sixty-four percent said they have hearing loss related to extended exposure to high noise levels," said Lauren Roling, a McCook Central FFA member in Salem, South Dakota. Along with sister Alyssa in 2024, they conducted a survey of farmers seeking input on hearing loss. That survey also found almost 75 percent of farmers don't use hearing protection, even when working around high noise levels.

Hearing loss is a fact of life on the Roling family farm, much like it is on thousands of farms around the country.

"We are the sixth generation on our family farm. We work beside our grandfather, father and brother. They all have some form of hearing loss," Lauren said. "We wanted to find a way to educate the next generation of farmers to prevent the trend of hearing loss in agriculture."

Addressing the stigma of hearing loss

Lauren and Alyssa's research confirmed there's a major stigma surrounding hearing loss among farmers. This stigma often stems from a perceived notion of weakness or vulnerability. The stigma may keep farmers from wearing hearing aids or seeking medical advice. This reluctance not only makes their hearing health issues worse but also impacts their overall well-being and safety.

Tackling the stigma around hearing issues is key to helping farmers take charge of their hearing health. Be open about it—start conversations and share success stories of farmers who have sought help. This can help reduce the fear of judgment and inspire others to prioritize their health. Understanding how common hearing loss is among farmers is a big step towards breaking down that stigma.

Helping boost lost hearing

Whether it's noise-induced or age-related – the two main types of hearing loss – the implications go well beyond just having to turn up the radio volume or ask someone to repeat what he or she has said to you. On the farm, hearing loss can make it difficult to hear warning signals or alarms, putting you at risk

of accidents. In severe cases, hearing loss can even contribute to social isolation, depression and cognitive decline.

The good news for farmers and anyone with hearing loss is there have been massive advancements in hearing aids and other tools to help restore the lost sense. Hearing aids were once just available with a prescription or recommendation by an audiologist or ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist. But today, over-the-counter aids and other tools like tinnitus maskers offer the same hearing assistance, often with a much lower price tag.

It's also important to add preventative measures whenever working around loud equipment or machinery on the farm. This includes wearing hearing protection and limiting the time of exposure to loud conditions.

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