

Preventing Injuries While Working with Cattle

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Working with cattle can be dangerous, making safe handling practices essential for preventing injuries and accidents. Although cattle are domesticated animals and are often docile, their size, strength, and unpredictable behavior can cause serious injuries and, in some cases, fatalities. Many cattle-handling injuries can be reduced through proper facilities, equipment, animal-handling techniques, and awareness of cattle behavior. The following precautions can help protect both handlers and animals. These precautions may be particularly important for agricultural workers with disabilities, injuries, or physical limitations that can affect mobility, balance, strength, reaction time, vision, or hearing. Thoughtful planning and appropriate equipment can help these individuals continue working with livestock while reducing the risk of additional injury.

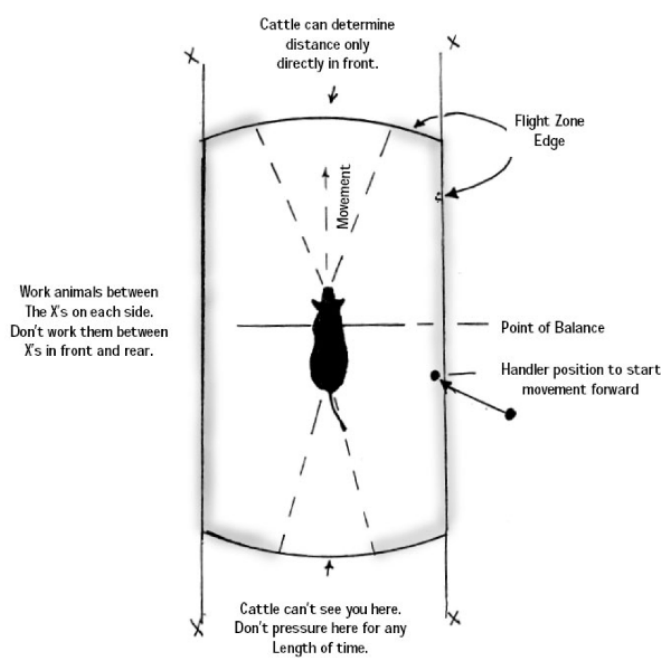


Courtesy of Spencer Selover, Freerange

Preventive Measures When Working with Cattle

Be aware of agitation. Cattle may have different familiarity with people and different levels of tameness. Past experiences, stress, and an animal's fight-or-flight response can lead to unexpected behavior. Signs of agitation could include erratic movement, vocalization, and the position of their head, ears, and tail.¹ Cattle have a flight zone, or an area of personal space surrounding the animal. When a person enters this zone, the animal will generally move away. Approaching cattle calmly and understanding their flight zone can help handlers anticipate animal movement and reduce unnecessary agitation.²

Never turn your back to cattle if you are in the same field, and never stand directly behind cattle. If you are working in a field where cattle are present, be aware of their presence and often look at their whereabouts. Cattle have a blind spot to their rearward vision, and should be approached calmly from the side to reduce



Source: PNW 593 Beef Quality Assurance Manual

Figure 1. Flight zone and blind spots of cattle.²

nervousness and potential erratic or protective behavior.³

Keep a barrier between you and cattle. A fence or corral will usually help protect you from the animals. Make sure that the fence or corral is well maintained and that cattle cannot pass or break through. Check your fences often.

If you are in the same field as cattle, **stay towards the outer edges of the field** so you can observe the cattle and are close to the fence if you need to get to the other side.



Photo courtesy of Unsplash, Kelly Sikkema

Avoid treating large cattle as pets or becoming overly comfortable around them. Even tame cattle can cause serious unintentional injuries through sudden movements of the head or body. Always remain aware of an animal's size, position, and behavior when working in close proximity.

Monitor and keep gates closed to contain cattle and keep them in designated areas where you want them to be.

Use appropriate restraint equipment when treating cattle. Squeeze chutes and other cattle-handling systems can safely restrain animals during procedures such as vaccination, dehorning, branding, castration, and artificial insemination.³ Select restraint equipment appropriate for the animal and procedure, and ensure that operators are properly trained in its use. A hydraulic squeeze chute is easier to operate and use than a manual squeeze chute.

Use extra caution around cows with calves. Mother cows can be very protective of their calves and can harm or injure you if you are near them. Make sure there is always a barrier between you and them. Whenever possible, use appropriate barriers or handling equipment to separate the handler from the cow. A properly designed calf catcher used with a UTV or ATV may provide additional protection when calves must be treated in the field.

Use additional caution around bulls and unfamiliar cattle. Bulls pose a particularly serious risk because of their size, strength, and potential for unpredictable or aggressive behavior. Young or unfamiliar cattle may also react unpredictably when handled and should be approached calmly using appropriate handling techniques.



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Repair damaged or weakened equipment before it becomes a problem. Broken corral panels, alleys, chutes, or issues with trailers and other equipment increase the risk of injury to you and the animal. Regularly inspect and maintain hinges, pivot points, hydraulic pumps, and emergency exits.⁴



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Well-designed handling facilities can also reduce animal stress and improve handler safety. An ideal handling facility is on well drained areas with slight slope away from the headgate and squeeze area. Concrete pads around chute and headgate provide cattle solid footing. Gates should be self-locking and have latches that can be operated from the catwalk, and loading chutes should be faced north or south to prevent cattle from looking directly into the sun and acting out of frustration.⁵

Keep cattle healthy. Sick, injured, or distressed animals may behave differently than expected and can be more difficult to handle. Monitor cattle for signs of illness or injury and use additional caution when handling affected animals.

Use appropriate sanitation. Cattle commonly transmit disease to humans, referred to as zoonotic diseases.^{1,2} These diseases can be viruses, bacteria, parasites, and fungi which range from mild to serious or fatal illness. Recent increases in the spread of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) H5N1 in Utah cattle emphasize the importance of staying vigilant in using appropriate sanitation.⁶⁻⁹ After working with cattle, wash hands in a designated sink and remove work clothes and boots before entering the home. Do not eat, drink, or smoke out in the field unless hands have been washed.

Personal protection also includes wearing long pants, closed toed shoes such as boots, and gloves for some tasks. It is ideal to work with another person when possible so in the event of an emergency there is assistance. First aid kits should be kept in vehicles and facilities for easy access in the event of an emergency.

AgrAbility programs can help farmers and ranchers with disabilities identify modifications, assistive technologies, and work practices that can improve safety when working with livestock such as cattle.

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