

Jan. 2, 2017

## Believe it or not — urban men are in better health than farmers

*Stress and constantly working take their toll, but there's a free and proven program that helps farmers enjoy healthier, better lives* by Jennifer Blair AF staff / Medicine Hat

by Jennifer Blair

You take good care of your land, your equipment, and your animals. But do you take the same care with your own health? Farmers tend not to think of themselves as a 'tool' that needs regular maintenance, says the program manager of Sustainable Farm Families Alberta.

Combines, for instance, go into the shop before every harvest where mechanics "do a pretty full assessment — they check all the belts and make sure all the fluids are good," said Jordan Jensen. "We need to do the same thing with our bodies once in a while. We don't need to wait until something is broken to fix it," he told attendees at the Farming Smarter conference last month. "It doesn't matter if you lose your leg in a grain augur or to diabetes.

Ultimately, it's going to have the same impact on your farm." The Sustainable Farm Families program is a little like that annual maintenance — but for the people who work on the farm. Launched in 2014, this free program aims to "increase awareness about the human resource on the farm." "The aim is really to provide farmers, their employees, and their families with tools, techniques, and strategies so that they can better and more effectively manage their health, well-being, and safety," said Jensen. And right now, that awareness is lacking, he said. "One of the questions we like to ask participants is, 'Who has a healthier lifestyle — city people or rural people?'" he said.

"Almost always, people say farmers. We have fresh air, we're outside, we're working all the time, and we don't have all the stress of driving on the Deerfoot. "These are valid points. But what we've found is that life expectancy in rural populations in Alberta tends to be about three years less for rural men than men in the city." That's because rural areas have "significantly higher" incidences of cardiovascular disease, cancer, and injury rates than urban centres. Quality of life also deteriorates more quickly for farmers than it does for urbanites, he added. "They may live a little bit longer, but they're also living a little bit healthier." But Jensen gets "a lot of resistance" from farmers when he talks about these statistics. "They think we're twisting the numbers," he said. "But what we've learned is that the rural population — especially here in Alberta — is at a bit of a disadvantage. We don't have the same resources that we need to take care of our health that are available to our counterparts in the city."

### *Risk factors*

So why are farmers at greater risk than their urban counterparts, despite the benefits that come with living and working on the farm? Well, living and working on the farm comes with its own problems. "It's not really through any fault of our own. This is just the nature of our lifestyle and the world that we live in," said Jensen. Long hours are part of the problem. "Farmers live at work. Their farm is right there. They look out the window and see the herd or

the crop or things that need to be done,” said Jensen. “A farmer doesn’t just get to say, ‘I’m going to take the weekend off.’ City people have traditional 9-to-5 jobs, and for the most part, farmers don’t have that luxury.” Stress levels tend to be higher, too.

“We can’t control commodity prices, the price of fertilizer, or the weather,” he said. “There’s a lot of stress that farmers have to deal with that city people don’t.” On top of that, farmers don’t have paid sick leave or easy access to medical services, so their attitude toward health is different than people living in urban centres. “Farmers are notorious for being tough and thick skinned. We don’t go to the hospital for anything,” said Jensen.

“I put a nail through my hand? Well, pull it out — what are you waiting for? Farmers tend to treat themselves instead of seeking medical attention. Oftentimes, that’s because it takes an hour to get to the hospital, and then when you get there, you’re waiting. Half the time, a farmer goes to a hospital that doesn’t even have an ER.” Living in the country also means help doesn’t arrive very quickly if there’s an accident. “If you roll your car on the Deerfoot, people will know. If you roll your car on the back 40, it will take a while for people to know, and in some cases, that’s too long.”

#### *Help is close at hand*

The Sustainable Farm Families program was designed to address some of these problems, said Jensen. When farmers sign up for the program, they commit to three years of annual health assessments and set goals to improve their lifestyle over that time. “Over these three years, they’re able to track and see how well they’ve done. And what we’ve been finding is that people have been making improvements from year to year.”

The annual health assessment gives producers “a snapshot of their current health status,” including their body composition, muscle mass, bone density, oxygen saturation, blood sugar, blood pressure, cholesterol, vision, and hearing. Through these assessments, the program has found that 71 per cent of farmer participants are classified as overweight and 16 per cent of those are classified as having secondary obesity. “We’ve also found that 58 per cent have a metabolic age that’s at least 10 years older than their actual age,” Jensen added. “That’s an eyeopening experience for them. That’s partly what motivates them to make a lifestyle change.”

During the workshops, farmers also learn about nutrition, fitness, mental illness, and personal action planning. “Over the three years, they get this education so that they’re then empowered to take action on these numbers that they’re given in their health assessment,” said Jensen. “We want them to set goals and create an action plan for where they want to be next year and what they’re going to do to accomplish that.”

And everything is related back to the farm, he added. “For instance, did you know the heart pumps 32 million litres per year, and that equates to 1.2 million bushels of blood?” he said. “We want them to be able to make the connection and understand, ‘I’ve only got this one heart and it does that every day?’ “How many pumps do you have on your farm? How often do you have to do maintenance on them? When was the last time you did maintenance on your heart?” Putting health into terms like that is often a “lightbulb” moment for farmers, he said. “We find that farmers are reluctant when they show up to the workshop — ‘I’m here because

my wife made me or because my boss told me to.’ But by the end of it, they’re always quite appreciative.”

For more information, go to [www.abfarmsafety.com](http://www.abfarmsafety.com) or contact Jensen at 403-752-4585 or [j.jensenSFF@abfarmsafety.com](mailto:j.jensenSFF@abfarmsafety.com) [jennifer.blair@fbcpublishing.com](mailto:jennifer.blair@fbcpublishing.com)