

FIT TO FARM?

with Stephanie Berkeley, Manager, Farm Safety Foundation (Yellow Wellies)

Please introduce yourself

My name is Stephanie Berkeley and I manage the Farm Safety Foundation or Yellow Wellies as many of you know us. I'm lucky enough to come from the most beautiful place on earth - Co Donegal in Ireland - and when I was growing up most of my friends were either farmers or fishermen, equally dangerous professions. I've had a long and varied career from fashion to farming, science to safety. I moved with my family to England in 2014 at the same time as the Farm Safety Foundation was being set up by NFU Mutual as an independent charity and the idea of working with the next generation of farmers to improve their attitudes to risk taking and mental wellbeing really appealed to me.



What do you think about when someone says are you "Fit to Farm"?

Our farmers are the best in the world and they are rightly proud of how well they take care of their land, their livestock and their machinery. The problem is that they put themselves quite far down the list.

The challenge we have is to build a culture within agriculture that recognises the importance of looking after both the physical and mental wellbeing of those living and working in it. We need to highlight how the job can impact on the wellbeing of farmers and their families and conversely how poor mental health can have a direct and deadly impact on the job. I mean, where would our agricultural industry be without the hard-working and dedicated people that live and work in it?

What is the Farm Safety Foundation doing to promote this?

We're a small team but we're working every day to raise awareness not only of the impact of poor safety behaviours but of the impact of poor mental health on farmers of all ages. As well as our recent Mind Your Head campaign and Farm Safety Week, we are delivering training to a range of farming industry audiences about risk-taking and looking after their mental health as well as carrying out research and collaborating with partners throughout the UK and further afield.

We might be a small charity, but we have BIG ambitions. Each one of us has a role to play. I love this industry and if I can do something to help those who live and work in it then I will.

What is it about the farming industry which makes it such high-risk for mental illness?

Farmers face many stresses, they work for long periods of time on their own, at the mercy of the weather, often living and working in the same place so there is no escape. They can have financial issues and the industry itself and the market for UK goods is changing. There are so many things that are out of their control so it's easy to see how someone can become stressed, anxious or worse.

Operating on a farm while feeling stressed or experiencing mental health problems isn't safe so it's really important to be aware that while you are your farm's greatest asset, you could be your farm's biggest liability so you really do need to be mentally and physically fit to farm.

What role does exercise have in ensuring someone is 'fit to farm'?

People who exercise regularly tend to do so because they feel more energetic throughout the day, sleep better at night, have sharper memories, and feel more relaxed and positive about themselves and their lives. It improves their stamina, their flexibility and it's also a powerful medicine for many common mental health challenges. As Blur sang, it gives them an enormous sense of well-being.

A recent study found that people who squeeze their exercise routines into one or two sessions during the weekend experience almost as many health benefits as those who work out more often. So a busy schedule at work or home is no excuse to avoid activity. Get moving whenever you can find the time—your mind and body will thank you!

What tips would you give to someone who is thinking about their fitness to farm and how to improve their fitness?

The most important thing to remember is that you don't have to be a fitness fanatic to reap the benefits on your physical and mental health.

Modern farming is more about brains than brawn. Whereas it used to focus on physical labour, modern farmers are just as likely to be found on a comfortable tractor using satellite technology to collect data about crops and soil. In a Farmer's Weekly survey, 55% of farmers who responded to the study said they exercised outside work – but only one third said they did so once a week or more. And 12% said they exercised less than six times a year, with 45% of respondents admitting that they never did any exercise at all.

Research also shows that modest amounts of exercise can still make a real difference. No matter your age or fitness level, you can learn to use exercise as a powerful tool to deal with mental health problems, improve your energy and outlook, and get more out of life on the farm. So how do you start?

1. **Start small.** When you haven't exercised for a long time, setting extravagant goals like completing a marathon or working out for an hour every morning will only leave you more despondent if you fall short. Better to set achievable goals and build up from there.
2. **Schedule workouts when your energy is highest.** Perhaps you have most energy first thing in the morning or at lunchtime before the mid-afternoon lull hits? Or maybe you do better exercising for longer at the weekends. Even a short, 15-minute walk can help clear your mind, improve your mood, and boost your energy level. As you move and start to feel a little better, you'll often boost your energy enough to exercise more vigorously—by walking further or even breaking into a run.
3. **Focus on activities you enjoy.** Any activity that gets you moving counts. That could include playing fetch with your dog or cycling to the local shop. If you've never exercised before or don't know what you might enjoy, try a few different things. Be comfortable.
4. **Wear clothing that's comfortable and choose a setting that you find calming or energising.** That may be a quiet corner of your home, a dander down by the river, or a climb up your favourite hill to watch the sun set.
5. **Reward yourself.** Part of the reward of completing an activity is how much better you'll feel afterwards, but it always helps your motivation to promise yourself an extra treat for exercising. What that reward is, is up to you.
6. **Make exercise a social activity.** Exercising with a friend or loved one will not only make exercising more fun and enjoyable, it can also help motivate you to stick to a workout routine. You'll also feel better than if you were exercising alone. In fact, when you're feeling a bit down, the company can be just as important as the exercise.

Farm Safety Foundation blog: 'RUN FARMERS RUN!' visit: www.yellowwellies.org/run-farmers-run/