

# LEVEL THE FIELD

Working for a more equitable farming industry



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A comprehensive guide to

## Managing physical strain on farm

*How to keep working safely with a health problem*

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# The business case for managing physical health on farm

Physical strain comes with the territory in farming. Livestock need handling, feed bags need lifting, and there can be days when someone climbs in and out of a tractor at least a dozen times.

Others will spend hours in the parlour, take long walks across fields or have to complete repetitive manual tasks. These are not just occasional demands – they are the job. And over time, that strain adds up.

The [Farmers Weekly Level the Field 2026 survey](#) reflects what many in the industry already suspect – physical health problems are commonplace in farming and are often managed without proper treatment.

Of the 1,700 people who responded, half said they were living with a physical health condition, injury or disability that affected their ability to carry out farm work. Among those respondents, four in five reported musculoskeletal problems, and three-quarters said their mobility had been affected.

## Why this matters commercially

Physical health on farm is often treated as a personal issue to be managed by individuals, but in reality, it is a core business risk.

Most farms are already operating with tight labour and rising costs. Losing an experienced person – whether suddenly through injury or gradually through declining physical ability – has a direct impact on how the business functions day to day, making it less efficient or productive and increasing pressure on other members of the team.



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If physical health problems are left unaddressed, the associated challenges can lead to accidents, time off work, or even the total loss of someone the business depends on.

Experience is one of the most valuable assets on any farm. Knowledge of how livestock behave, how land responds or how machinery performs in specific conditions is built over many years. When someone leaves because the role becomes physically unsustainable, that knowledge goes with them, and it cannot quickly be replaced.

There is a safety aspect to consider, too, with a huge 42% of respondents to the [Farmers Weekly Level The Field survey](#) reporting that they had felt unsafe carrying out certain tasks because of a physical condition. A worker managing pain or reduced mobility without support is more likely to push through tasks, cut corners or take risks simply to keep up.

Longer-term, the research showed physical health can also be a significant factor in whether farms continue running, scale back or are passed on successfully.

When experienced farmers are forced to step away earlier than planned, continuity is disrupted. Adapting roles and systems can extend working life and help maintain the viability of the business across generations.

From a business perspective, then, the question is not whether physical health problems should be addressed – it is whether the farm can afford *not* to address them.



VISIBLE VERSUS INVISIBLE CONDITIONS

When people hear the word disability, they often picture something obvious, like a wheelchair user or a visible mobility aid. In reality, a large proportion of health conditions are far less visible and, for that reason, can be harder to recognise and easier to overlook.

In agricultural workplaces, these “invisible” conditions are more common than many realise. They can include:

- **Chronic pain** – arthritis, long-term back injuries or nerve damage that make lifting, twisting or repetitive work difficult to sustain
- **Fatigue disorders** – including long Covid or ME, where energy levels fluctuate unpredictably and long or physically demanding shifts become exhausting
- **Autoimmune conditions** – such as rheumatoid arthritis or Crohn’s disease, which cause pain, inflammation and fatigue that can vary day to day
- **Hearing loss or partial sight** – sensory changes that affect communication, hazard awareness or safe working around machinery
- **Neurological conditions** – including Parkinson’s disease, multiple sclerosis or nerve damage affecting balance, strength or co-ordination
- **Long-term recovery from injury or surgery** – where someone may appear “back to normal” but is still rebuilding strength and physical capacity.



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## What ill-health actually looks like on farm

On most farms, physical health problems show up in small ways during everyday work and are often easy to miss. Recognising these early signs is what allows problems to be managed before they become more serious, both for the individual and the business.

### From the worker's perspective

For someone managing pain, fatigue or reduced mobility, the change is often gradual and largely invisible to others. In practice, it may look like:

- Avoiding certain jobs such as heavy lifting, repeated climbing, or handling gates
- Taking longer to complete routine tasks
- Adapting techniques or posture, which could mean lifting differently, leaning on equipment for support, or changing body position to protect joints
- Hesitating before certain movements such as climbing down from machinery, stepping over gates, or lifting awkward loads

Many people will try to carry on without saying anything because they are worried about being seen as less capable or creating extra work for the rest of the team.

### From an employer's perspective

These changes are not always obvious and they are easy to misinterpret. What appears to be reduced motivation, slower work or lack of engagement may in fact be someone working hard to stay productive while managing a physical problem.

Because these adjustments happen gradually and often without discussion, they can go unnoticed for long periods. By the time the issue becomes clear – when tasks can no longer be completed or time off is required – the problem has usually been developing for some time. Acting at that stage is still possible, but tackling the problem earlier is almost always easier.



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CASE STUDY: ANDREW AND YVETTE JACKSON

Andrew Jackson, a 58-year-old fourth-generation beef and sheep farmer from near Penrith in Cumbria, has had myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) for more than 13 years.

He farms 180 acres with his wife Yvette and son Kieran. A farming accident led to his diagnosis and the condition has steadily changed how he works.



Reorganising the work

“All I ever wanted to do was to farm, and I feel hopeless and frustrated not doing what I used to do,” says Andrew. “But I still attempt to go out every day and it gives me focus.”

Some tasks, such as drenching sheep, are no longer possible due to pain in his hands and reduced grip strength, so they now belong to Kieran. Moving sheep between fields is done from the quad or gator, as walking long distances is too difficult.

On TB testing days, Andrew takes on lighter duties like turning cattle and handling paperwork to keep him connected without putting his body at risk.

Contractors now cover hedge-laying, walling and fencing, while the vet practice handles procedures Andrew once did himself.

Daily planning

His condition is discussed daily, with tasks broken into smaller steps or handed over entirely. Jobs that can be rescheduled are moved, while those that cannot wait are done without him, with neighbours called in when needed.

His collapses are the hardest variable to plan around. He has previously blacked out while feeding cattle at the outdoor troughs and come round surrounded by his herd. He no longer checks or feeds the stock outside when alone. But on better days, he helps in the sheds, wraps fleeces or oversees work, and rest breaks are built in to every day. Planning for those moments is now part of how the farm runs.

The family have reduced the flock since Andrew’s diagnosis. Although the Continental cattle remain, that too stays under review, alongside the possibility of switching to an easier-calving alternative.

Plans are also in place for the future if Andrew worsens significantly. Yvette will step back from her full-time job, Andrew will move into an advisory role, and the ground will be let to neighbours.

Permission to talk

What has surprised the family is how much their openness about Andrew’s condition has affected others. Farmers who would never have discussed health issues before have approached Andrew at markets, sharing their own struggles, and a neighbour facing a cancer diagnosis came to their door, feeling for the first time that someone else understood.

“It’s kind of given people permission to talk,” Yvette says.

“Farmers are struggling with chronic illnesses, and sometimes you can’t do it all on your own,” says Andrew. “It’s OK to ask for help.”

“We have our moments,” echoes Yvette. “But we try to make the very best out of the life we can.”



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# Preventing problems before they start

For sole operators, physical health is not just a personal issue – it is directly tied to whether the business can continue to function. But there is no sick pay, no automatic cover, and no one to step in unless it has been planned in advance.

So if your ability to work changes suddenly, even for a short period, the impact is immediate. In practice, this makes planning ahead one of the most important – and often overlooked – parts of running the business.

## Practical steps that make a difference

None of these measures removes the risk entirely. But having something in place reduces pressure and gives you options if something does go wrong:

- Identify who could provide short-term cover, even on an informal basis
- Build relationships with neighbouring farms before you need to call on them
- Contact machinery rings early so you know what support is available
- Keep clear, simple instructions for key jobs on hand so someone else could step in if needed
- Review insurance cover to understand what protection is actually in place.

## Measures to protect your body

While planning for disruption matters, reducing the likelihood of health problems developing in the first place is key. On many farms, ways of working evolve around what gets the job done quickly, rather than what is sustainable over time. This can mean the same movements are repeated day after day, or tasks are carried out in ways that place unnecessary strain on the body.

Small changes to how everyday jobs are done can significantly reduce wear and tear, helping workers stay fit for work over the long term. Practical steps that reduce long-term risk include:

- Reducing repetitive tasks, not just heavy lifts, where possible
- Carrying loads evenly across both sides of the body
- Looking over both shoulders when driving machinery, rather than always twisting one way
- Acting on early stiffness, aches and pains before they become injuries
- Investing in supportive footwear to reduce strain and prevent falls
- Building a short daily routine of stretching or mobility exercises
- Paying attention to sleep, nutrition and hydration.



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CASE STUDY: ANDY VENABLES

At 35, Andy Venables felt as fit as he had ever been. He put the lower back pain he had been experiencing down to too much desk work and poor posture. But a swelling on his testicle eventually prompted him to go to his GP and get checked out. When he finally did, he was told he had cancer that had already spread to his lymph nodes and was heading for his lungs.

That year was written off for surgery and chemotherapy. It was also a time for Andy and his family to reassess their dairy farm in Cheshire and his ancillary business, Hillsgreen Marketing.

“We are the first to call the vet if something doesn’t feel right with an animal,” he says. “Yet we, the farmers, are the last to call the doctor when something doesn’t feel right for us.”

Andy milks 330 cows across 202ha (500 acres), producing 2.6m litres/year for the Co-op. He runs it alongside his family, including his dad, and a small, long-serving team. One member has been there 35 years; another has clocked 20, and a third joined at 16 and has been there a decade.

Keeping that team matters to him, practically as much as personally. When one of the workers had appendicitis, he was off on full pay. When the longest-serving member broke his leg and damaged his tendons, he was out for six months, with his wage covered throughout that period.

That cover comes from an NFU key worker insurance policy Andy took out specifically for such situations. It brings peace of mind that if a key person goes off sick, the policy pays their full wage rather than dropping them to statutory sick pay.



Removing the barriers

Andy’s mother spent years nursing, including 15 in a hospice, and his sister is a sports physiotherapist. Health is talked about openly in their household, and when any of the workers are in pain or have a nagging injury, Andrew will make them an appointment with his sister. “The problem gets dealt with before it becomes a six-week absence,” he says.

Both businesses are signed up to Health Shield, a scheme that Andy pays into monthly which allows staff to claim back the cost of dental appointments, eye tests and physiotherapy.

“Staff don’t lose pay to attend appointments,” he says. “Nobody needs to ask permission and feel guilty about it. It’s bad enough having the problem, but feeling like you can’t ask your boss for an hour to go and sort it shouldn’t be part of it.”

Raising awareness

Since his diagnosis and subsequent recovery, Andy has been speaking publicly about men’s health at agricultural conferences and industry events, drawing a direct line between farmers who call the vet at the first sign of something wrong and the same farmers who let their own symptoms sit untreated for months.

“It’s my way of giving back,” he says. “If one person goes to the doctor about something they’ve been putting off or stopped something that was potentially going to turn into something sinister, then I’ll feel like I have helped in my own small way.”



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## Planning the farm around people

Many farms are organised around tasks, rather than the long-term capability of the people doing them.

Over time, this can create hidden risk, with the same person always taking on the most physically demanding jobs. This may mean the farm lacks resilience if someone's physical capacity changes. Building a more resilient system means asking:

- Could this task be done differently?
- Could more than one person do it?
- What happens if this person cannot do this job tomorrow?

### Steps farms can take to boost health-related resilience

Most effective changes are straightforward and low-cost, particularly when introduced early. In many cases, carrying out these small adjustments is much cheaper than the cost of replacing a skilled worker or managing the consequences of an accident.

#### Share the physical load

- Rotating demanding jobs reduces cumulative strain and prevents one person carrying the same burden every day.

#### Use equipment as standard

- Telehandlers, hoists, trolleys and feed systems should be part of everyday working, not just used when something feels too heavy.

#### Adjust how work is done

- Breaking tasks into stages or allowing slightly more time can keep someone working safely without reducing output.



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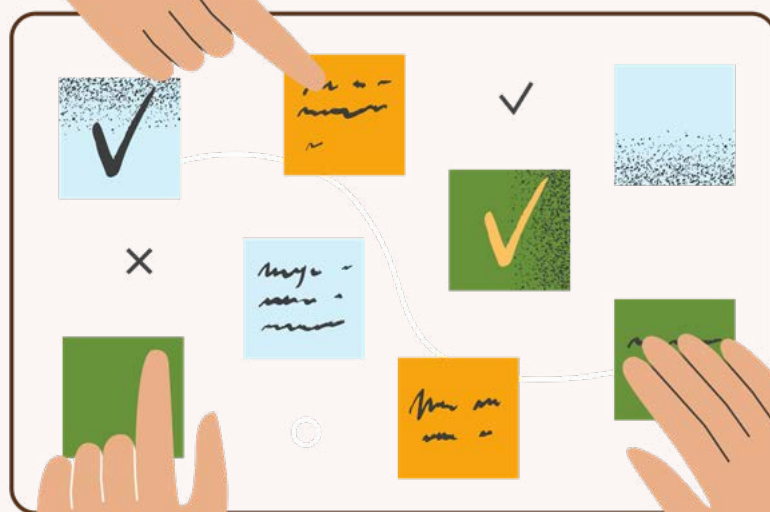
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**Improve the working environment**

- Small changes to layout and equipment can reduce more strain than big investments. Rehanging stiff gates, shortening distances between jobs or improving handling systems so stock move more easily all reduce the physical load of everyday work.

**Consider basic manual handling training**

- This doesn't need to be time-consuming. In many cases, it's about simple, practical changes to how everyday jobs are done which can significantly reduce long-term strain.

**Have early conversations**

- A simple, practical check-in can prevent a long-term issue from developing.

**Rethinking roles**

The most useful shift many farms can make is not a major investment, but a change in how work is viewed. A lot of farm roles are treated as fixed packages, with one person doing everything that job involves. But in reality, most jobs are made up of different tasks, and those don't always have to be done in the same way, or by the same person every time.

This isn't about creating new roles – it's about making practical adjustments to how work is carried out.

These are not always neat changes, and they may vary from day to day. But treating work as flexible, rather than all-or-nothing, allows farms to retain experience while reducing physical strain. For example:

- Someone with joint pain may reduce how much physical handling they do, while still making key decisions about livestock
- A farmer with hearing loss may spend less time around noisy machinery and more time planning, organising or supervising work
- Someone managing fatigue may adjust when jobs are done, rather than trying to push through long, continuous days
- A shepherd with a knee injury may limit time spent on difficult ground, while continuing to manage flock decisions and breeding.



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**CASE STUDY: MILLY FYFE**

When Milly Fyfe suffered a spinal cord stroke during childbirth, the midwife told her it was just cramp. She was reassured that how she felt was normal, but as months passed, she watched other new mothers return to everyday life while she continued to struggle with movement and pain.

After nearly two years, she began to push back. “I knew there was something wrong with me,” she says. What followed was seven years of searching for a diagnosis while managing a farm, raising children and living in escalating pain. At one stage she had so little core strength that she rigged a pulley system from an old dressing gown cord to haul herself out of bed each morning.

“If I’d chopped my arm off, or there was something visible, people might have given me a break,” she says.



**Keeping the farm going**

Farm life didn’t stop and, in the early stages, she tried to keep up as normal, but was unsuccessful. Tasks were adapted where possible, with equipment such as a sack barrow reducing strain. Work was broken into shorter spells, with feeding and animal care prioritised. More physically demanding tasks were taken on by her husband, Andrew.

There was no formal plan in place when things first went wrong, and no sick pay to fall back on. As a self-employed farming family, they had no access to statutory sick pay, and state benefits were not available either.

What bridged the gap was a small payment from a local sickness fund and a modest private medical insurance policy she held for years, costing around £12 a month. She was also supported by the British Guild of Agricultural Journalists, which paid for some of her travel expenses.

The mental strain grew alongside the physical. For years, she lived with the anxiety of not knowing what was wrong, or whether anyone would ever be able to explain it.

The turning point came when the Spinal Injuries Association advised her to request a referral to a specialist pain centre in London from her GP. Once she reached the right team, the diagnosis came quickly and was confirmed as a spinal injury.

Doctors recommended a spinal cord stimulator – a device implanted under the skin that sends electrical pulses to disrupt pain signals. The operation was a success and Milly has come off heavy medication, sleeps properly and is adjusting to life with far less pain. “I’ve realised how much pain has robbed from my life,” she says. “But I can’t dwell on that, she says.”

**Building a new routine**

Managing her recovery alongside the farm has required a complete rethink of how she works. Equipment such as the sack barrow remains in use, and her days are carefully planned around pacing and rest, with energy treated as a resource to be managed.

She also channelled the experience into something new, creating a farm education centre welcoming schoolchildren and adults with special needs.

“If you are in pain and it’s not going away, you need to seek the support to deal with it,” she says. “If you have a chance to help yourself, then do it, and live a better quality of life.”



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## Building the right culture

For any practical change to happen, people need to feel able to raise issues early.

On most farms, that comes down to the owner or manager – but it's not always straightforward. Teams are often small, roles overlap, and people may be related or working closely together day in, day out.

That can make it harder to speak up. Many will keep quiet because they don't want to let others down, be seen to be struggling, or create more pressure for the rest of the business.

But where openness exists, problems are identified sooner, when they are easier to manage. Where concerns are dismissed or avoided, they tend to surface later, when options are more limited.

In practice, this does not require formal processes; it comes down to everyday behaviours. Small actions build the trust needed for early conversations – and early conversations are where the most workable solutions are found:

- Listening carefully when something is mentioned, even in passing
- Asking simple, practical questions rather than assuming
- Being willing to adjust how work is organised where possible

### What 'good' looks like in practice

On farms where physical health is managed well, the difference is not usually in how much work gets done, but in how that work is carried out. It is about recognising that small, everyday tasks – repeated hundreds of times a week – are a major cause of wear-and-tear injuries.

- Equipment is used as standard to reduce strain, not just when something feels too heavy
- Jobs are set up to avoid unnecessary effort – fewer awkward lifts, less back-and-forth, less forcing things that don't move easily



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- People deal with problems early, rather than pushing through until something gives
- Roles and routines are adjusted when needed, even if only slightly
- Adjustments are seen as part of running the farm, not a sign that something is wrong.

On smaller farms in particular, this is not about sharing work between people, but more often about:

- Fixing the small things that make jobs harder than they need to be, such as rehangng stiff gates or improving yard layouts to reduce unnecessary walking or lifting
- Making sure machinery and handling systems can be accessed and used easily, rather than relying on physical effort
- Being deliberate about how jobs are done, not just getting them done as quickly as possible
- Recognising when a way of working is causing strain and changing it before it leads to injury

## QUICK FARM CHECK

Taking a step back and looking at your own farm, and asking a few simple questions, can highlight where strain is building.

- Which jobs leave you or others most sore at the end of the day?
- Which jobs get done the same way every day, even if they are hard on the body?
- Are there tasks that one person always ends up doing, simply out of habit?
- What would happen if you could not do your usual jobs tomorrow?
- What is one small change that would make a regular job easier?



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# Where to find help if you're struggling with poor physical health

## CHARITIES

### Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI)

RABI supports farming people across England and Wales who are dealing with illness, injury or financial difficulty. Help can include financial grants during recovery, assistance with living costs if income falls, funding for home adaptations or equipment, wellbeing support and counselling, and access to the RABI Return to Work service.

For anyone recovering from injury, the Return to Work programme helps farmers adapt their operations or identify practical ways to stay active in their business while they recover.

- For more information, visit [rabi.org.uk](http://rabi.org.uk) or call 0800 188 4444

### Farming Community Network (FCN)

FCN runs a national helpline staffed by volunteers, many of whom come from farming backgrounds. FCN can connect farmers with local practical help, offer guidance on benefits and grants, and provide emotional support during periods of difficulty.

- For more information, visit [fcn.org.uk](http://fcn.org.uk) or call 03000 111 999

### Addington Fund

Where illness or injury threatens housing security or the ability to remain on the farm altogether, the Addington Fund may be able to help. Support can include emergency financial assistance, housing help in extreme circumstances, and recovery aid after serious accidents or disasters.

- To find out more, visit [addingtonfund.org.uk](http://addingtonfund.org.uk) or call 01926 620 135

## GOVERNMENT SUPPORT AND WHAT IT COVERS

It's tough, but it's a reality that self-employed farmers/contractors are not entitled to Statutory Sick Pay. Several benefits can apply if illness prevents work, though many workers never explore them. Consider these options.

### Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)

can provide income where a health condition limits your ability to work. Eligibility depends on National Insurance contributions and a medical assessment. It's not perfect, and the process takes time, but it can offer some financial breathing room during recovery.

- For more information visit [gov.uk/employment-support-allowance](http://gov.uk/employment-support-allowance) or call 0800 169 0310

### Personal Independence Payment (PIP)

This is not linked to employment status; rather it exists to help cover additional costs associated with long-term health conditions or disabilities. People who continue working but face ongoing physical challenges may still qualify. Payments are based on how the condition affects daily life and mobility, not on whether someone is earning.

- For more information visit [gov.uk/PIP](http://gov.uk/PIP) or call 0800 917 2222

### Universal Credit

This may also apply where farm income drops significantly. The system can be difficult to navigate for farming businesses because income fluctuates, but advice organisations can help work through it.

- For more information, visit [gov.uk/universal-credit](http://gov.uk/universal-credit) or call 0800 328 5644



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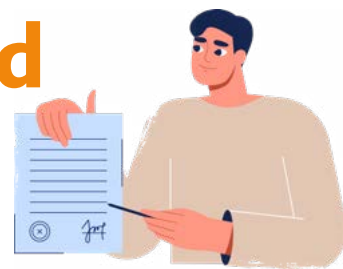
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# What farmers need to know about the law and health



Employment law can be complicated, but it does need to be understood – particularly on farms where roles are physical and conditions can change over time. Getting this right is not just about compliance; it protects the business as well as the worker.

Here are five areas every farming employer should have a handle on.

## 1. The Equality Act 2010 – it covers more than you might expect

A person is considered disabled under the Act if they have a physical or mental condition that has a substantial, long-term effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. You do not need a formal diagnosis on file, and the individual does not need to describe themselves as disabled. If the condition fits the definition, the legal protections apply.

## 2. Reasonable adjustments – they're a legal duty, not a favour

If someone meets that definition and is struggling with aspects of their role, you are required to consider reasonable adjustments. On a farm, this usually comes down to practical changes – how work is organised, who does which tasks, or how and when jobs are carried out. Much of what this guide has covered – adjusting tasks, using equipment, changing routines – falls into this category.

## 3. Statutory Sick Pay – it starts from day one

Legislation introduced on April 6 2026 means employees no longer have to wait until the fourth day of illness to receive SSP, and even short periods off work can now qualify. Workers must still meet the basic criteria,

including notifying their employer and being provided with a sick note if the illness lasts more than seven calendar days.

SSP is paid at 80% of an employee's average weekly earnings or the standard weekly rate (currently £123.25), whichever is lower. What matters beyond the payment is maintaining contact. A brief, regular check-in during absence helps both sides plan a realistic and sustainable return to work.

## 4. Phased returns – they're often the safer option

Bringing someone straight back to full duties after illness or injury can increase the risk of them going off again. A gradual return, building up hours or responsibilities over time, is often more effective and more sustainable for the business. It also demonstrates that the farm has taken a reasonable and thoughtful approach if any issues arise later.

## 5. Risk assessments – they need to reflect current ability

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 requires employers to protect workers and carry out risk assessments. If someone's physical condition changes, those assessments should be reviewed. Tasks that were previously safe may no longer be.

Keeping risk assessments up to date helps prevent accidents and shows risks are being managed properly.

### A FINAL PRACTICAL POINT WORTH NOTING

Brief records matter. Notes on conversations, adjustments made or changes to working practices don't need to be formal or time-consuming. But having something written down shows that decisions have been considered and are reasonable.



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**YOUR COMMENTS WELCOME**



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**SOURCES AND EXPERT INPUT PROVIDED BY**

- Gov.uk
- NHS
- Farming Community Network
- Addington Fund
- RABI
- McClarons Insurance
- Farmers Weekly Level the Field 2026 Survey
- ME Association
- Spinal Injuries Association
- Health Watch North Yorkshire
- Clarks Legal
- ACAS
- Health and Safety Executive
- Fit for Work
- The Federation of Small Businesses

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