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How Can I Operate My Lawnmower Safely?

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A weekly question/answer column

How Can I Operate My Lawnmower Safely?

Richard Beard answers:*

Each year, hospital emergency rooms treat more than 60,000 individuals with lawn care related injuries. A majority of these injuries occur to people under age 16 and are attributed primarily to unsafe practices, rather than equipment malfunctions. Safety guidelines recommend that children under 12 not operate power equipment. A person's body size, strength, coordination, experience and maturity affect his or her ability to safely operate a lawnmower. To improve the safety of mowing equipment for young people as well as for adults, consider the following tips.

- Each year before the lawn care season begins, review the operator's manual and the manufacturer's recommendations for safe operation. Perform regular maintenance on your mower as outlined in the operator's manual. Prior to using your mower, check for worn or loose tires, belts, guards and covers. The mower blade(s) should be sharpened periodically to improve quality of cut and operating efficiency.
- Make sure that you know how to turn off the lawn mower in an emergency. Always wear safety glasses, snug fitting clothes, long pants and work shoes. In some instances hearing protection is also necessary. Mower shields and guards must remain in place and operational for personal protection. Never bypass the safety kill switches or disable controls that stop blade rotation. Older mowers should be replaced with newer models that have modern safety equipment.
- Do not place hands or other objects in the discharge chute or under the deck while the mower is operating.
- Remove objects and debris from the area prior to mowing. Objects such as rocks, stumps and sticks easily become dangerous projectiles. If a mower has an open discharge chute, direct it away from people, animals or fragile property, since injuries from objects launched by mower blades account for many accidents.
- Do not operate mowing equipment around children. Never leave a running mower unattended. Some of the larger or commercial mowers allow the mowing blade to be disengaged and the engine to remain running. If operating a mower like this, take special care when you remove the bag to empty clippings or perform other activities near the mower while the engine is running.
- Wait until the grass on an incline is dry, then mow across the slope with a walk-behind mower, or up and down the slope with a riding mower to avoid slipping. Some slopes are too steep to mow with a walkbehind or riding mower.
- Never allow passengers on riding mowers. It is very dangerous to let a small child ride on the mower with an adult.

- If the self-propelling power of a mower is used to transport a mower over a gravel road or other debris covered surface, disengage the blade or turn the mower off and push it rather than mow over a dangerous surface.
- Allow fuel-powered mowers to cool before adding fuel or working on the engine. Do not add fuel while the mower is running and do not mow or add fuel while smoking.

When you turn power equipment off, allow all rotating parts to stop before attempting repair or adjustment. Remove the spark plug before attempting repairs or blade adjustment on gasoline-powered equipment. If you use an AC electric-powered mower, mow when the grass is dry to reduce the chance of electrical shock and take special care to prevent mowing over electrical power cords.

As with all power tool operations, do not hurry when mowing. People who mow at excessive speeds are risking injury.

* Richard Beard, Utah State University Extension Machinery Structures, and Electricity Specialist