

Shock tactics

Electric fences are important for stock control on most farms and, in general, are not major safety hazards – but sometimes things can go wrong, writes Margaret Hawkins.



We received the following email from a concerned father, who wanted to remind readers of the potential health dangers relating to electric fences:

We had an encounter with a standard electric fence recently, which I think your readers should know about.

Our seven-year-old was climbing between sheep wire and a livestock strand when his head/neck touched the live wire. He received several shocks before his older brother pulled him clear.

The result was temporary but complete blindness lasting an hour, an irregular heartbeat, vomiting and severe headaches lasting through the night. He spent that night in hospital, but thankfully has had no lasting side effects. A distressing experience that I believe could have been tragic.

We asked Pdraig Delaney of the Health and Safety Authority what lessons can be learned from this upsetting incident that could happen on any farm in Ireland, and how aware of electric fence safety we should all be.

“While in Ireland we have had no fatality from a correctly wired electric fence, electric fences should be regarded as hazardous and treated with appropriate caution,” says Pdraig.

The HSA spokesperson also noted that an incorrectly wired fence connected directly to the mains supply has, in fact, caused a fatality on an Irish farm when a farmer received a lethal shock from the continuous mains output voltage, rather than the pulse output that most people are familiar with. Generally, fences are charged to give a pulse electrical output.

The Health and Safety Authority spokesperson advises proper wiring of electric fences, proper supervision of children in the farm environment and proper choice of fences in the first place.

“There is no point in choosing a very powerful fence if that level of power is not needed,” Pdraig says. “Generally, there shouldn’t be any fatal hits off an electric fence, but very powerful ones can have more serious consequences. Normally, you are not going to get these kinds of shocks one after another from an electric fence. Because it’s pulsed, you will be able to pull away.

“Electric fences are not good things to be hitting, of course, and in what is probably an exceptional situation described here the child appeared to get entangled and to receive several pulses. It was probably also exacerbated by the fact that he, unfortunately, got the pulses in the neck or head, and another part of his body was probably earthed through the sheep wire at the same time. That meant it was more difficult to get out of. Luckily, his older brother was there to pull him away.

“The best advice is that electric fences should generally be regarded as hazards round the farm. Children should be warned of the dangers and kept away from them,” cautions the spokesperson.

DIFFERENT LEVELS OF FENCE

While this was a standard electric fence, it is important to remember there are various levels of electric fence out there, Pdraig says.

“There are mains-powered fences and battery-powered fences and different power outputs from the fences. Some are more powerful than others, and the level of precaution would be associated with the level of risk, and the level of risk is



Children should be made aware of the dangers of electric fences and kept away from them.

FIND OUT MORE

FREE ADVICE BOOKLETS

The ESB booklet *Farm Well, Farm Safely*, available from ESB offices and from www.esb.ie, has useful technical advice about electric fences on pages 18 and 19. Electric fence suppliers also provide some information on their websites.

In 2007, the Health and Safety Authority and Teagasc brought out a booklet entitled *Stay Safe On the Farm with Jessy the dog*. It is a lively, colourful and informative booklet that farming parents can read to young children about dangers on the farm.

While it is an excellent booklet and covers every other conceivable hazard on a farm, Jessy the dog does not have any advice for her puppies about staying away from electric fences. Perhaps this could be added in a future edition?

For further information on first aid training with the Irish Red Cross, log onto www.redcross.ie.



associated with the level of power that’s in them.”

Teagasc’s Tom Ryan told *Country Living* that electric fence safety would be a topic at an upcoming meeting of the Electro Technical Council of Ireland, at which Teagasc and the HSA will have a representative. He referred us to the ESB’s booklet *Farm Well, Farm Safely* for general advice in relation to electric fences.

Commenting on safety, he says: “The big thing in all the safety information relating to electric fences is not to connect two energisers to the same fence or have two separate fences with separate energisers so close that someone could come into contact with both at the same time. Also, getting caught up in a fence is to be avoided at all costs.”

RED CROSS

We asked Chairman of the Irish Red Cross Training Committee Tony

Lawlor for advice and guidance on first-aid actions regarding electric shock from electric fences. “As a general comment, most fences properly maintained and installed should not pose a substantive risk to farmers or farm families,” he says.

“This is because the current in the fence is generally low and not of a voltage to cause a severe shock to a human or large animal. However, the current in the electric fence controller may be considerably stronger and capable of giving a severe shock,” explains Tony.

FACTORS INFLUENCING SHOCK SEVERITY

“The weight and condition of the person in contact with the electricity may influence how severe the shock is. Clearly, a child would be more affected than an adult, and a person standing in water would be more severely shocked than one on dry ground.

“Fatigue, perspiration, the presence or absence of gloves and the wearing or not of rubber-soled Wellingtons can all influence how mild or severe the shock is. A severe shock that passes through the trunk of the body can stop breathing and heart action, which could be fatal.

“A milder shock can also cause a deep and hard-to-treat burn where the current enters and leaves the body – usually the hand and foot,” he says.

“Casualties, including child victims, who have suffered moderate electric shock are often capable of successful resuscitation. That’s unlike cases of high-power electrocution from overhead or underground power cables, which are almost invariably fatal events,” warns Tony.

FIRST AID – WHAT TO DO

Tony Lawlor outlined the following

WEB WISE



NEW ASTHMA AND ALLERGY INFORMATION

Do you have asthma or suffer from allergies? If so, log onto www.asthmasociety.ie to view new information videos about the conditions.

The Asthma Society of Ireland has teamed up with RTE's Nuala Carey to present a new online information resource for people with asthma and allergies in Ireland.

The online videos contain advice and information on all aspects of asthma and allergy, including common triggers for asthma, how to keep an asthma-friendly home and swimming with asthma.

Paediatrician Peter Grealley says Ireland has the fourth highest prevalence of asthma worldwide, and many Irish people do not have their symptoms under control. "These videos will greatly benefit people who are unsure of triggers in the environment and in their own homes." The Asthma Helpline number is 1850-44-54-64.



NEW STROKE WEBSITE

The Irish Heart Foundation (IHF) has launched the country's first website dedicated to stroke, called www.stroke.ie. This is to support the 10,000 people, who are affected by stroke in Ireland every year. Better stroke services are needed in this country as well as more information for stroke survivors and their families, according to the IHF's Chris Macey.

"In November 2009, we launched a stroke manifesto, which outlined a 16-point plan to improve stroke services here. We hope www.stroke.ie will enable people in every corner of Ireland to support our efforts," he says.

actions for providing emergency first-aid assistance for electric shock:

1. Stop the current by switching off the power. Don't touch the person who has received the electric shock until you have had the power shut off.
2. If it is not possible to switch off the power safely then – wearing a set of rubber-soled Wellingtons, or standing on a rubber mat or wooden box – push the shock victim's limbs away from the electric source with a wooden stick, brush handle or wooden chair.
3. Do not use anything wet or metal, as these conduct electricity.
4. Alternatively, a rope or belt may be used to drag the victim away from the power source.
5. Avoid touching the casualty until no longer in contact with the power.
6. It is important not to allow any wet material to come in contact with the casualty.
7. Phone 999 or 112 for an ambulance.
8. If, at this stage, the victim is unconscious but breathing, place them on their side in the recovery position.
9. If not breathing, start resuscitation.
10. Advise the ambulance personnel and the hospital staff how long the victim was in contact with the electricity. **CL**



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