

## Farmers lose their hearing at alarming rates

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(Medical Xpress)—Bruce Breuninger's 350-acre centennial farm sprawls beneath the ceramic blue sky, quiet but for the occasional bird call and Dudley the dog's aimless barking.

Then Breuninger powers up his front-end loader and breaks the stillness like a jackhammer in church.

Breuninger operates the loader several hours a day, and such constant exposure to dangerously loud noise means the rate of on-the-job [hearing loss](#) for farmers like Breuninger is second only to construction, said Marjorie McCullagh, associate professor at University of Michigan School of Nursing. McCullagh hopes her research project, HEAR on the Farm, changes this trend by developing interventions that help farmers recognize risks and wear [hearing](#) protection.

Noise-induced hearing loss is particularly devastating because it's irreversible, and [hearing aids](#) and surgery don't help. Farmers are extremely vulnerable because the Occupational Safety and Health Administration doesn't regulate noise exposure on farms. Scientific findings regarding the prevalence of hearing loss among the estimated 1.3 million farmers nationwide vary greatly, with numbers ranging from 17 percent all the way to 72 percent.

The majority of farmers don't wear hearing protection but do want to learn more about it, McCullagh said. The fact that 90 percent of farmers enrolled in her study are still participating supports this, especially when researchers consider retention rates of 30-to-50 percent highly successful.

"There are no systems in place to help them," McCullagh said. "[The farmers](#) are expected to do that on their own."

McCullagh and Michael Cohen, clinical research coordinator, traveled separately to different parts of the country to recruit participants.

Breuninger, a fourth-generation farmer in Dexter, Mich., and one of 500 study participants nationwide, said he's worn hearing protection—only

intermittently—but does suffer some hearing loss.

"I probably didn't wear it as religiously as I do now," said Breuninger, whose 80-year-old father, also a farmer, suffers [profound hearing loss](#). "I do worry about my hearing, and I've always tried to impress upon my kids the importance of wearing hearing protection."

Provided by University of Michigan

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