A stitch in time saves … 110 on average. Why chainsaw use requires complete attention.

In recent years there has been a surge in chainsaw ownership in Australia. Electric chainsaws can be purchased for as little as $99 and even more powerful petrol driven models from just $100 more. Because they are cheap and accessible many “handy men” figure it’s cheaper to cut that fallen tree or source their own firewood than hire an expert to do it. And because there is no permit or training required and it looks relatively simple, people think it’s a point-and-shoot process.

Each year almost 1,000 Australians are badly injured while operating a chainsaw. The majority of these incidents happen around the home but there is still an alarmingly high number of work-based incidents as well.

A 1989 study by the Davis-Garvin Insurance Agency, a specialist logging insurance underwriter in the US, provided the amazing statistic that the average chainsaw injury requires 110 stitches, and incurred medical costs of $5,600 on average.

A further comprehensive US study on chainsaw injuries undertaken between 2009 and 2013 reported a total of 115,895 hospital visits stemming from chainsaw use over this period. Most injuries were to males (95%) who were predominantly aged between 30–59 years. The majority of injuries were lacerations (80%) and the most common injuries were to legs and knees (36%) and left hand and wrist (35%).

The most common injuries are:

- Cutting injuries from kick back, pull in or when sharpening the chain
- Crush and stick injuries from cut foliage or falling branches
- Striking injuries, specifically eye injuries, from flying debris and sawdust.

Clearly there is insufficient planning and a lack of suitable controls in place when such accidents occur. Closer examination of this reveals that there are normally three contributing factors –

- The Design of the Saw
- Safe Operating Procedures
- Personal Protective Equipment

1. SAFE DESIGN

Injury associated with the design of chainsaws has been significantly reduced thanks to the adherence of manufacturers to design standards such as AS2726.1 (2004 Chainsaws – Safety Requirements – Chainsaws for general use).

Design requirements that have improved the safety of chainsaws include such things as an automatic chain brake to prevent kickback, addition of a chain catcher, stricter vibration standards, throttle trigger lock-out and guarding of all rotating parts excluding the chain.
Periodic inspection of your chainsaw against mandatory and recommended safety features is advisable, and something we help our clients with every day.

_Below is a drawing identifying the components of a typical chainsaw_

2. SAFE OPERATING PROCEDURES

Controls around the way a chainsaw is used and by whom is critical to minimizing risk and is determined by guidance AS2727 (1997 Chainsaws – Guide to safe working practices).

**Some of the things an operator must consider include:**

- Do they have the necessary training and physical capabilities to do the work?
- Do they need assistance from other people or any additional special equipment?
- Are they tired, fatigued or under the influence of alcohol or medication?
- What are the current and predicted weather conditions?
  Extreme temperatures, heavy rain, lightning or strong winds can make chainsaw operation risky.
- Are there any physical ground hazards such as undergrowth, stumps, holes etc that might hinder movement?
- Are there any unsafe trees nearby? Look up! Are there any hanging dead or broken limbs overhead known as ‘widow makers’ for obvious reasons?
- Who else is in the area? Be aware of other activity, traffic or machinery movements.
- What are your workmates doing? Is there sufficient separation distance between the chainsaw operator and other personnel? Do not work alone, and maintain regular contact with other workers.
- Is there other tree felling activity in the area? Ensure a minimum of at least two tree lengths of any tree felling activity.
3. PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

PPE that should be considered minimum standard when using a chainsaw includes:

- Hearing protection
- Eye protection
- Foot protection
- Long sleeves & trousers
- Protective Chaps
- Hand protection
- Where applicable – Sunscreen

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