

News from SHC - St. Louis

Time to Remember Lawnmower Safety!

Spring has finally arrived! Rising temperatures and longer daylight hours bring the kids outside to play, and the grown-ups outside to work - namely, mowing the lawn. But, the two don't mix, warn experts at Shriners Hospitals for Children - St. Louis.

"Kids should not be outside when you're mowing the lawn," says Emery Miko, director of orthotics and prosthetics at Shriners Hospitals for Children - St. Louis. "Accidents happen fast."

Each year, Shriners Hospitals across the country treat hundreds of children who have been seriously injured as a result of power lawnmower accidents. These accidents can result in the loss of fingers, toes, limbs, eyes, and, tragically, permanent brain damage or even death. Complications such as bone splinters and spurs, scar tissue, growth problems and infections resulting from embedded dirt often make recovery from lawnmower injuries lengthy and difficult.

"Lawnmower accidents are entirely preventable," Miko says. "If adults set strict rules for their children about mowing and yardwork, they can take an active role in preventing tragic accidents," he advises.

About 25% of all injuries resulting from running over a child with a lawnmower can be prevented simply by not allowing a child to be a passenger on a mower, according to research by physicians at the Shriners Hospital in Greenville, S.C. The remainder would be prevented if children were kept inside the house while adults are mowing the lawn.

"We recommend that parents educate their children about the dangers of lawnmowers just as vigorously as they do about running into the street, or getting into a car with a stranger," Miko says. "It's not just about saving limbs, it's about saving families."

The effects of an injury from a lawnmower accident extend beyond the physical, says Gayle Young, director of care coordination at Shriners Hospital St. Louis.

"The psychological impact on a family is lifelong when a child experiences a serious injury or loss of a limb," she says. "In most cases, a family member such as a parent or grandparent is operating the mower when the accident happens. The guilt and blame adults experience after the accident puts a huge stress on families."

The stress further complicates treatment for the child, Young says. Children face going back to their regular life with a permanently changed body - not to mention the possibility of future complications and more surgery.

"Because they are experiencing their own guilt and grief, these families have a difficult time providing the kind of support the child needs to recover from his or her injuries - both physically and emotionally," Young says.

Fortunately, Shriners Hospital's philosophy of care treats the whole child - body, mind, and spirit - not just his or her physical injury. "We're not just fitting a prosthesis, we're treating the family," Miko says. "They become 'our kids.'"

"We can help these children have a pretty good life after a lawnmower accident - once they receive a prosthesis, we let them know that the sky is pretty much the limit for them," Miko says. "But they would have a much better life if the accident had never happened in the first place, Miko warns. "We can make an excellent prosthesis - but it's not the same as having your own limb."

Lawnmower Safety Tips

- Do not take passengers on riding lawn mowers.
- Keep children out of the yard - and indoors - while mowing the lawn.
- Children under the age of 14 should not be allowed to operate a lawnmower.
- Always prepare your lawn for mowing. Remove all sticks, rocks, toys, etc. Make sure nothing is hidden in the grass that could end up being dangerous debris or projectile.
- Handle fuel with care. Wipe up spills. Never fill the tank on a mower that is hot. Never smoke or use any kind of flame around gasoline.
- Check guards and shields. Be sure to read the owner's manual and know how to operate the equipment. Don't remove or disable guards or other safety devices.
- Use a mower with an automatic blade cut-off. Stay behind the handle until the blade stops. Never reach under a mower while it is still operating. If you need to remove debris or check the blade, disconnect the wire from the spark plug.
- Don't cut grass when it's wet.
- On slopes, mow up and down rather than across the slope.
- Wear appropriate clothing and shoes: long pants, long-sleeved shirts, eye protection, heavy gloves, and sturdy, close-toed shoes with slip-resistant rubber soles.