

# You are Aging Faster than Your Trees, or Tree Limbs vs. Human Limbs: You Lose



by Kirk V. Dahl, MD

I wish I had written this article a decade ago. That way, I could have read it to myself and possibly avoided some very unwelcome injuries.

Over the course of a decade, the effects of aging are more observable on our comparatively frail human bodies than on our trees. The trees win.

Though aging is normal and predictable, the process is slow enough that we don't perceive its effects day to day, or maybe even year to year. Therein lies the problem. Beyond about age 30, we become progressively less capable of performing many heavy tasks and more prone to injury, and we do not always recognize this slow but inevitable slide until we start to injure ourselves.

Just a few comments here to establish some credibility. I am an emergency physician with over 30 years in practice, so I've seen many thousands of injuries. I'm not a sissy, as demonstrated by a lifetime of skiing, running, biking, harvesting firewood, and other sturdy feats. I have had my share of overuse injuries, several requiring surgical repair. Finally, I am still actively working in woodlands I purchased 35 years ago.

Most discussions about safety in the woods center around chain saws, felling trees, protective clothing, avoiding dangerous critters, and so on. These discussions help us manage our woodlands safely, but we should also identify how to manage our bodies safely.

The key point is that inevitably things progressively deteriorate beyond a certain



Tommy McEneany, grandson of Dick and Charlotte Thompson of Lake Geneva, "helps" grandpa by using his limbs to prune red pine limbs.

Whether or not you can safely tackle the task at hand depends upon your overall health status, prior injuries, fitness level, how repetitive the work is, and whether joint range of motion is being pushed to extremes. To avoid injury consider:

- Setting limits for yourself
- Being alert to the tendency to deny aging
- New and unusual activities should be approached in moderation
- Regular stretching exercises are important
- Heavy lifting is a big risk: follow safe lifting recommendations
- Working smarter not harder, and consider using mechanical aids or friends and family to help accomplish the work
- Taking extra precautions to prevent falling



age. A young person in their 20's or 30's can feel invincible, indestructible. At that age, fit men and women in good health can vigorously and confidently push themselves to their physical limits and generally will not injure themselves.

But many of us are not 30 anymore. Some are not 50 anymore. Strength and stamina have declined. Predictably, it becomes increasingly unsafe to attempt all the things we could do at a younger age. The body's ability to regenerate and repair itself diminishes.

You have to be brave to get old. Here is what happens, and it is not pretty. Bone density and muscle mass begin to decline around age 30, so bones and muscles start to weaken.

Joints are affected by thinning of cartilage, making them less resilient, less slippery, and less able to absorb impact. Ligaments and tendons become more rigid and brittle, and thus more fragile. Joint range of motion becomes more limited.

Loss of strength can impose increased stress on certain bones and joints, and the muscles of older persons are not able to contract as quickly. Movement becomes less efficient, and muscle metabolism rate, or the rate at which muscle creates energy from blood nutrients, slows. As the heart and blood vessels age, blood flow to tissues is reduced, contributing to their loss of bulk and an overall decline in tissue quality.

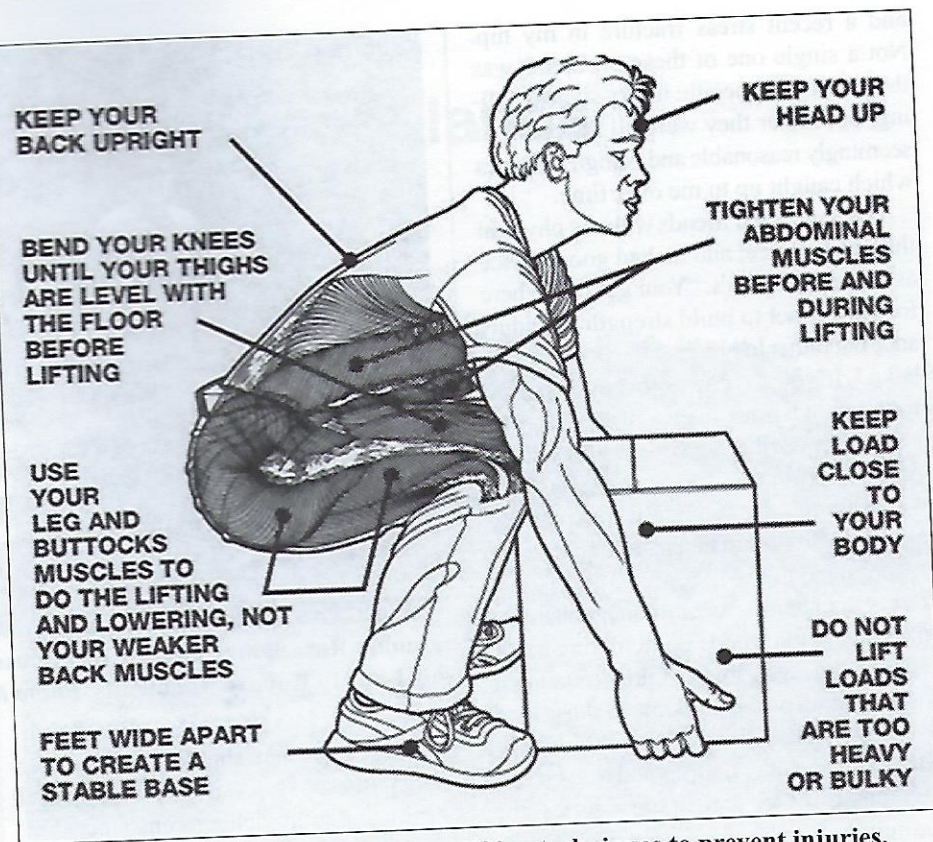
The result of all this is loss of mobility and increased risk of sprains, aches, arthritis, fractures, tearing of muscle and other soft tissues, falls, and other trauma.

As a general guideline, if you are healthy and accustomed to physical activity, and you are doing your routine things while pacing yourself and listening to what your body tells you, for the most part you will be fine.

But when you engage in unusual activities, or excessively repetitive motions, especially those putting great strain on joints and soft tissues, beware! It may not take much for the "weekend lumberjack" to succumb to an overestimation of what an aging body can handle.

It is not possible to provide good objective guidelines as to how hard you can safely work at various ages, as that is wildly variable. Those who have been physically active throughout life and are used to it will fare better.

I've had three shoulder operations, two cartilage repair jobs at the knee, a hernia,



When lifting heavy objects use proper lifting techniques to prevent injuries.



The Garske work crew of Harshaw knows to wear safety gear while using chain saws, but have they considered their physical limitations? Photo by Carl Garske.



and a recent stress fracture in my hip. Not a single one of these problems was the result of a specific injury such as falling, but rather they were all the result of seemingly reasonable and benign activities which caught up to me over time.

I became good friends with my physical therapist, Bruce, and he had good advice as I entered my 60's: "Your goal from here forward is not to build strength or endurance but rather to preserve the function you have." If you have ever lost even partial function of a limb, even temporarily, you know how terribly you miss being able to function normally.

Set limits for yourself, be realistic about what you can tackle, and follow the recommendations for safe lifting (squat rather than bend). A common mechanism of injury in the woods is attempting to lift unsplit "bucked" logs off the ground and into a pickup or trailer. Some of those logs can easily push you beyond safe limits. Back and shoulder injuries and torn biceps tendons or other soft tissue injuries are common. Maybe the tendon won't rupture right away, but repetitively pushing it beyond its limits will often fray a tendon, weakening it and making it more prone to rupture as time goes along.

As your capacity for work diminishes, avoid the temptation to fight it with even more work. My own mistake was failing to correctly identify why I was having shoulder pain while doing things I had been doing comfortably up to that point. I thought I was just out of shape, so I pushed harder. Things got worse, not better, and I ended up in the operating room for tendon repairs. Three times.

Preventing age-related decline is unrealistic, but slowing its progress and limiting its effects is possible. Any preventive



**Lyndon Russell and his little helper use an ATV and trailer to work smarter on his Lincoln County woodlands. Photo by Deb Russell.**

measures you take should only be undertaken after consideration of your overall health and individual circumstances.

However, regular stretching exercises, especially if adopted early in adulthood, help to slow stiffening and the loss of range of motion. Appropriately tailored physical training like moderate weight lifting and swimming, even yoga, help maintain muscle bulk and slow some effects of aging. Diet and supplements may be useful, such as vitamin D and calcium, but work with your doctor. For most people, there are countless benefits to becoming or remaining physically active, and conversely, a sedentary lifestyle accelerates decline of most human organs and function.

Even a seemingly benign but repetitive activity like knitting can lead to tissue breakdown over time. Recognize that even without injury, tissues need time to rest and

recover. If you have a known prior injury that flares up easily, then you need more layers of caution. Even riding in a car too long can be enough to aggravate a touchy hip or a degenerating knee.

For some people, extra precautions need to be taken just to walk around in the woods. Consider possible hazards such as roots, stumps, uneven ground, wet leaves, and mud. A walking stick is handy for both balance and support, recognizing that declines in visual acuity, balance, dexterity, and reaction time may contribute to an increased risk of falling.

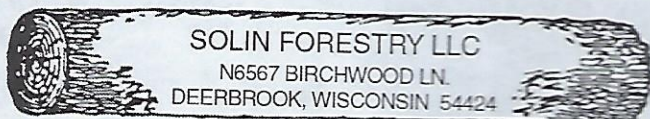
If you are young, you are probably ignoring all of this. To reiterate, though, you are on a slow but relentless pathway along which you will gradually lose your capacity for unrestricted work. Watch the signs along the way as you age.

It is far better to progressively dial it down a bit as you journey through life, rather than risk an injury that will stop things altogether in some sudden and perhaps permanent way. If you don't stop pushing your body too hard, eventually your body will stop you.

Stay active. It's healthy and preventive. Use it or lose it. But work smarter, not harder.



*Kirk Dahl is a lifetime member of WWOA and has been a woodland owner since 1982. He was founder of the Chippewa Valley Chapter of WWOA in 1987 and hosted the field day for the 2011 WWOA Annual Meeting. He resides in Eau Claire.*



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