

## **LAWNMOWER ACCIDENTS AND INJURIES**

As the days get longer and hotter and as the grass starts to grow, more people will be taking out their mowers and cutting their lawns. However, it is easy to forget just how dangerous mowers can be. Every year, mowers are responsible for thousands of injuries, many to children.

The injury rate with mowers (riding mowers in particular) is very high, with 663,000 people needing medical attention due to mower injuries between 1996 and 2004, and with an average injury rate among owners of riding mowers of 2.6 injuries per 1,000 users. It is important to remember that most people, on average over the course of a year, use their mowers only once or twice each month. This means that, per use, mowers are far more dangerous than many other kinds of products, including cars and even guns.

Injuries caused by lawnmowers can be very serious. Many injuries are the result of people being exposed to the whirling mower blades. These blades, designed to cut grass, can also efficiently cut humans, and can result in the loss of fingers, toes, and even entire limbs. Some people suffer eye injuries and blunt trauma when debris, such as rocks and sticks, is shot out of the mower's discharge chute at 170 miles per hour; others are burned on exposed engine parts and mower decks, which can get very hot when a mower is in use.

### **Backover Accidents**

The most serious type of lawnmower injury is the so-called "backover accident." As the name suggests, a backover accident occurs when a lawnmower operator backs over himself or someone else. Backover accidents alone injure almost 600 children per year. Although all mower accidents have the potential to be serious, backover accidents are often the worst for children because the operator does not see the child behind him and rolls the mower entirely over the child.

A few years ago, the lawnmower industry voluntarily placed a safety feature on mowers, called the "no-mow-in-reverse" feature. This feature automatically disconnects the mower's blades when the mower is put into reverse, in theory eliminating the possibility of a backover accident. The problem is that the mower industry also added a feature that allows mower

operators to override this safety feature and continue to mow in reverse. It is also possible to mow in reverse even if the operator does not override the feature, for example, when the mower is mowing uphill and the gears slip, causing the mower to roll backwards—in such cases, the no-mow-in-reverse feature often does not work.

### **In the Courts**

Lawsuits over the dangerous condition of mowers have had mixed results. In several federal cases, the courts have found that warnings to keep children away from the mower were adequate and that the mower manufacturer was therefore not liable for not installing a no-mow-in-reverse feature or for allowing it to be overridden. Lawsuits in state courts have been more favorable, with juries several times faulting the mower manufacturer for the lack of some safety feature.

If you have been injured by a lawnmower, you might have a products liability suit against the manufacturer and others. The defendant usually fights such claims vigorously, because even one successful claim could open the door to hundreds or thousands of other claims.

These lawsuits also tend to be highly technical, requiring detailed evidence from expensive design and manufacturing experts about how the product was made incorrectly, how it could have been made differently, and how these failures caused the injury.

### **Lawnmower Safety Tips**

Although lawnmowers are very dangerous, they can be used safely. Follow these tips to reduce the chances of injuring someone while mowing the lawn:

- When you mow, make sure that the area is clear, especially of children.
- Inspect the yard before you start, and remove debris. A mower can shoot a stick or rock out of the chute at 170 miles per hour, causing serious injuries.
- Inspect your mower before you begin, in order to make sure that it is in good condition and safe to operate.
- Do not mow up and down hills, as the mower can roll backwards. Instead, mow across a hill. NEVER mow while going in reverse.

- Do not mow wet grass. Operators can slip on wet grass, losing control of the mower.
- Wear the proper safety equipment, including long pants, long sleeves, sturdy shoes, eye protection, and ear protection.
- NEVER put your hand anywhere near the blades of a mower that is running, even if you think that the blades are disengaged.

The grass may be greener on the other side of the fence, but you still have to mow it – mow safely.

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