

Avoid the Emergency Department: Essential Chainsaw Safety Tips for Warren County Residents

By Nate Barott

In the North Country, where towering pines and maples are as common as snow in January, chainsaws are indispensable tools for many homeowners. Whether it's clearing storm debris or preparing firewood for the long winter, these powerful machines make tough jobs easier. However, without proper precautions, they can also lead to serious injuries.

According to national safety data, chainsaw-related injuries account for tens of thousands of emergency department visits annually in the U.S. As a medical student training at Glens Falls Hospital, I once helped treat a patient who came in with a deep laceration across his thigh after the saw kicked back unexpectedly. He was not wearing protective chaps, and the chain sliced through heavy denim like it was paper. He survived, but not without surgery, weeks of rehab and a long break from the work he loved.

I've used chainsaws for several years, both at home and as a volunteer firefighter responding to storm damage. Through that experience, I've seen just how vital these tools are, and how quickly injuries can happen when safety is overlooked. Drawing from firsthand experience and expert recommendations, here are three critical safety steps everyone should follow when operating a chainsaw.

Studies from professional logging groups and university safety programs confirm that the majority of chainsaw injuries happen because operators were not properly protected. Make sure you wear the right protective gear: a good pair of chainsaw chaps and a helmet with face protection. Chainsaw chaps are made with special cut-resistant fibers designed to jam a moving chain almost instantly, buying you precious seconds that can prevent a life-threatening injury. A helmet with face protection shields your skull and eyes from falling branches and flying debris, which are often overlooked but dangerous risks.

Other protective gear like sturdy gloves and steel-toe boots provide vital protection from slips and flying wood. Hearing protection is important too, since most chainsaws are loud enough to cause permanent hearing damage within minutes.

Second, strive to avoid kickback. Kickback occurs when the tip of the chainsaw's guide bar contacts an object or gets pinched, causing the saw to jerk back violently toward the operator. Although modern chainsaws have design features that decrease this risk, kickback remains one of the leading causes of chainsaw injuries, and it happens faster than most people can react.

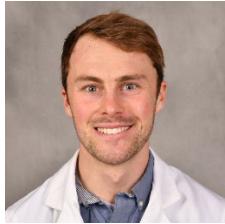
To minimize the risk, avoid cutting with the tip of the bar whenever possible and stay constantly aware of where the tip is positioned. Use a chainsaw equipped with a chain brake, which can stop the chain immediately if kickback occurs. Maintain a firm grip at all times, keeping both hands securely on the saw and wrapping your left thumb under the front handle for added control. Stand slightly off to the side of the saw rather than directly behind it. If a kickback does occur, the saw is less likely to strike your body.

Finally, know that effective chainsaw use is not just about making the cut. It's about planning every move. Before you pull the starter cord, take time to survey the area. Look for hazards like dead branches, uneven ground or overhead wires that could create unexpected dangers. Plan an escape route before making any cuts, especially when felling trees. The safest way out is typically at a 45-degree angle away from the direction the tree should fall. Avoid making overhead cuts whenever possible, as cutting above shoulder height drastically reduces control and increases the risk of losing grip or misjudging the cut. Take regular

breaks to stay mentally sharp. When you are tired, your reaction time slows and your risk of injury rises dramatically.

Why do these preventable injuries keep happening? In many cases, it's not ignorance – it's culture. Some folks tell me they don't bother with chaps or a helmet because they're "just cutting one branch," or because the gear feels expensive or inconvenient. It only takes five minutes to suit up for that 30-second job, and those five minutes could save you five hours in the ED and a \$5,000 medical bill.

Stay safe out there. We'd much rather hear your chainsaw stories at the hardware store than at the hospital.



Nate Barott is a fourth year medical student at the State University of New York (SUNY) Upstate Medical University. Following his clinical training experiences in Glens Falls, Barott chose to participate in the Targeted Rural Health Education (TRHE) program, which focuses on teaching student doctors the importance of rural newspapers as a way to share health information with their community. The information is not for diagnosis or treatment and should not be used in place of previous medical advice provided by a licensed practitioner.