

UC Monthly Safety Spotlight, March 2014

Careless Chris Learns a Hard Lesson About Power Tools

Rain was in the forecast, and fictitious employee Careless Chris planned to make the most of the few sunny days ahead. A warm spell had resulted in an untidy overgrowth of shrubs and an amazing proliferation of weeds, but Chris was up for the challenge. He considered himself very efficient in managing his property. He had a regular routine of quarterly landscape maintenance and a garage full of tools to make the job easier. His collection included a brand-new set of lithium battery-powered, cordless yard tools that were the envy of the neighborhood.

Using the same battery as his power drill and circular saw, the yard tools included an exceptionally noisy leaf-blower, a sleek hedge trimmer/lawn edger combo, and his pride and joy, a powerful but lightweight chainsaw.

Before starting to work, Careless Chris put on gloves and safety glasses and changed his shorts for a pair of sturdy blue jeans. He traded his sneakers for work boots, and put on his wide-brimmed hat for sun protection. "Let's face it; I'm a pro," he thought to himself as he arrayed his sparkling clean, orange and black tools on his deck stairs. "I'm going to have all this done and cleaned up in time to meet the guys for basketball at four o'clock."

He started by mowing and trimming his lawn and blowing grass and dead leaves into a neat pile destined for the recycling bin. He went on to dig out some stubborn weeds and plant a few six-packs of bright flowers.

Chris then regarded the one adversary he found hardest to handle – a mature hedge of tall, thorny barberry shrubs. "I swear they've grown six inches in a month," he grumbled as he attached the battery to his state-of-the-art chainsaw. After about five minutes of fighting with the branches, he looked at his watch and realized that completing the job and cleaning up would make him late for the basketball game.

"This is just going too slow," he said to himself. "I can move much faster if I just do a few adjustments." Using his trusty role of duck tape, Careless Chris taped down the lock-off switch meant to prevent accidental start-up of the chain. "That's better," he thought. "Now I can make some time!" Instead of the slower (but safer) process of using the saw with both hands, he wielded it with his right hand and used his left hand to pull the cut branches away. Things moved along quickly, especially since he didn't have to push the safety switch every time he paused. But just as Chris was nearing the end of the hedge, disaster struck. He put a little too much pressure on a large branch at just the wrong angle and the saw slipped to the left – aiming directly at his left hand as he gripped the branch.

Fortunately for Chris, his sons were home at the time and were able to call 9-1-1 and stay with him in the emergency room. The doctor had bad news: not all parts of his fingers could be saved.

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“You’re lucky to have the use of your hand at all and fortunately for you it was your left hand” she said after his emergency surgery, “but you’ll need a few more surgeries and a lot of physical therapy.” Chris was horrified. The pain and anxiety were overwhelming. No more basketball for him for a long time. In addition to that, there would be no more happy days spent working in his yard or playing his accordion at the polka parties for the foreseeable future. Worst of all, he wouldn’t be able to work at his normal job, which required extensive keyboard use. Careless Chris was thoroughly humbled.

Though he had taken good precautions – wearing sun and eye protection, gloves and sturdy footwear, and not working while fatigued or after drinking alcohol – he made the serious mistake of sidestepping safety procedures because he was in a hurry. He also let overconfidence eclipse his better judgment about working safety.

Fortunately, his supervisor was able to find alternate work for him as he recovered, but his injury caused him to make a permanent job change. After intensive therapy, Chris was eventually able to resume activities with his friends and family and even take up his beloved yard work once more. Never again would he take safety shortcuts because of rushing, overconfidence or simple boredom. The experience transformed him into a zealous advocate for safe work procedures. As he told his friends, family and anyone who would listen: read and follow the manufacturer’s instructions, never disable safety devices, stay aware of the risks, and remember that you’re not the only one who suffers if you are injured.