

SUMMER BRANCH DROP

Guidance for Centre Managers

Key message: Summer branch drop is rare and difficult to predict. It describes the unexpected failure of a large limb from an apparently healthy mature tree, often in warm, calm summer weather. It should be managed through sensible site selection, routine observation and prompt exclusion of any area where concern is identified.

1. Trees and branches commonly associated with Summer Branch Drop

Reports most commonly involve mature or over-mature broadleaved trees, particularly:



Oak



Beech



Ash



Horse Chestnut

Species alone does not make a tree unsafe. Younger, vigorous trees appear less prone than older or declining specimens, and most trees will never experience summer branch drop.

2. Factors which may increase likelihood

Tree or branch characteristics	Weather and recent history
Large, mature or over-mature tree.	A prolonged hot or dry period.
Long, heavy, near-horizontal limb, especially if extends beyond the crown.	Recent storms, or other events which may have caused hidden damage.
Poorly tapered branch or foliage concentrated towards its outer end.	Heavy rain following dry weather, adding weight to foliage and shoots.
Previous limb failure from the same tree.	Hot, still or calm summer conditions.
Visible defects: cracks, cavities, decay, deadwood, fungi or opening at a fork.	A recent unexplained branch failure nearby or elsewhere on site.

These are associated factors, not a reliable test. A branch may fail without obvious warning, and the presence of one factor does not mean failure is imminent.

3. Signs requiring immediate action



- A new crack, split or opening in a branch or branch union.
- A limb that appears newly sagging, displaced, partially detached or hung up.
- Freshly fallen branches or a recent unexplained cracking sound.
- A large dead or leafless limb during the growing season.
- Newly visible decay, fungi, cavities or loose bark around a major limb.
- Any concern raised by staff/visitors/contractors about movement or deterioration.

4. What to do when concern is identified



Stop use immediately. Move people, tents, vehicles and activities away from beneath the limb and the wider area it could reach.



Create a clear exclusion zone. Use barriers or signage and do not stand beneath the branch to inspect it. Include the area below the whole affected branch and a sensible margin beyond its tip.



Contact a competent arborist. Arrange prompt inspection by a suitably qualified and insured tree professional. Treat a hanging, split or actively moving limb as urgent.



Record and communicate. Log what was seen, photographs taken from a safe position, the weather and action taken. Brief duty staff and affected groups.



Reopen only when confirmed safe. Remove the exclusion only after the hazard has been dealt with or a competent person has advised that use can resume.

5. Preventative and mitigating arrangements

- Complete a regular (monthly) visual check of high-use areas including camping pitches, paths, queues, seating, play areas, car parks and activity bases, looking at trees for their general health and condition.
- In periods of hot weather increase this frequency to weekly checks for any trees which have been identified as at high risk and require monitoring by the latest external tree survey, OR trees in the vicinity of any other trees which have been known to recently have branch failure.
- Ask groups to look up before pitching and to avoid tents, hammocks, cooking areas and seating directly beneath large overhanging branches - particularly long, near-horizontal limbs.
- Share the Summer Branch Drop information sheet with groups on check in during periods of hot weather.
- Ensure staff know how to report a concern and have access to barriers or hazard tape

A simple rule

If you can see a significant defect, a recent change or a fallen/hanging limb then keep people out and obtain competent advice.

Do not wait for certainty.

Further information

“Summer Branch Drop” - Research Note issued by the D O E Arboricultural Advisory & Information Service <https://www.trees.org.uk/Trees.org.uk/files/08/088789e7-c393-4661-9f2c-5b40d5eb7f6f.pdf>

“Summer Branch Drop: When apparently healthy trees suddenly shed large limbs” – Treelaw.co.uk. <https://www.treelaw.co.uk/summer-branch-drop-when-apparently-healthy-trees-suddenly-shed-large-limbs/>