

Did you know that people between the ages 20 and 50 are more likely to experience back injuries due to snow shoveling?

Baby boomers and Gen X'ers may not realize how out of condition they have become. Every winter people see physical therapists for injuries caused by shoveling snow. It's well known to all of us who clear our walks and driveways that snow shoveling can be a repetitive activity that causes muscle strain to the lower back and shoulders. The following are some guidelines that we recommend to keep you healthy and pain-free during the winter weather.

Snow Shoveling Guidelines for Safety

Before shoveling, consider:

- Avoid shoveling snow if you are not in good health. If you have a heart condition, speak with your doctor before attempting to shovel snow.
- Make sure you drink plenty of water and are fully hydrated.
- Use a shovel with a shaft that lets you keep your back straight while lifting. A short shaft will cause you to bend more to lift the load. Using a shovel that's too long makes the weight at the end heavier. Step in the direction in which you are throwing the snow to prevent the low back from twisting.
- Dress warmly and in layers. Cover your hands, ears, neck, and head.
- The American Heart Association regards shoveling snow as an aerobic exercise. Prior to shoveling snow, consider performing warm-up stretches or exercises.

While shoveling, consider:

- Shovel early and often.
- Try to push the snow in front of you. If you have to lift the snow, do so in small amounts. Bend your knees and lift snow with your legs - not your back.
- Do not toss snow over your shoulder or to the side.
- Take frequent rest breaks - stand up straight and walk around periodically to extend the lower back.
- Avoid excessive twisting and forward bending, because the spine cannot tolerate twisting as well as it can other movements.
- Standing extension exercises will help reverse the excessive forward bending of shoveling: stand straight and tall, place your hands toward the back of your hips, and bend backwards slightly for several seconds.
- Use salt or de-icing compounds to remove ice from steps, sidewalks, etc
- If you or anyone you know is experiencing back pain, consult your physician or a physical therapist.

Sources:

The American Heart Association (www.americanheart.org)
The American Physical Therapy Association (www.APTA.org)

Karen Stengle, DPT is a physical therapist at BodyWise Physical Therapy in Columbia, MD. She can be reached at 240-841-2639 or Karen@BWtherapy.com