

Snow-Shoveling Safety Tips

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As I sit down to write this article, it is still warm and sunny, but by the time it shows up in print, late fall will be upon us, with winter not too far behind. A fresh snow is one of the most beautiful and peaceful things to witness, but shoveling snow can be very stressful. The physical exertion of bending, lifting, and twisting, combined with the exposure to freezing weather conditions, can take a serious toll on the body.

Anyone who has shoveled snow before knows how good a workout it can be. When you consider that the average shovel-full of snow weighs 5-10 pounds, the average drive or walkway may hold hundreds of pounds of snow. Typically, the arms, shoulders and back get sore and may occasionally feel pain. The cold air invigorates most people into action; however, the same cold air can numb the sensations of pain and fatigue. Unfortunately, pain is a sign that an injury has already occurred or that mechanically you are doing something incorrect in shoveling the snow.

I share the following information with my patients every year. I will often format it into a handout for patients to take home or to give out to others. You may want to edit it or add a few more points depending on your practice style, but it's important information to share if you practice in an area of the country that gets snow.

There is a right way and a wrong way to shovel snow - paying attention to your technique can make a big difference in how you feel the next day. As with any project, the prep work is the most important. The following are some tips on how to shovel snow *smarter*:

- *Be prepared.* Spray your shovel with Teflon so the snow will not stick to it. The more snow that stays on the shovel, the heavier it gets and the more chance for injury - and frustration.
- *Do a warm-up first.* A tight, stiff body is asking for injury. A few minutes of stretching can save you a lot of pain later. When you are shoveling, don't forget to breathe. Holding your breath makes you tight and stiff.
- *Layer your clothing.* Layered clothing will keep your muscles warm and flexible. You can shed a layer if you get too hot. Make sure you wear gloves that cover your wrists; if your wrists get cold, your fingers, hands and arms will be cold, too.
- *Wear the right shoes.* Choose shoes with plenty of cushioning in the soles to absorb the impact of walking on hard, frozen ground.
- *Use the right size shovel.* Your shovel should be about chest high on you, allowing you to keep your back straight when lifting. A shovel with a short staff forces you to bend more to lift the load. A too-tall shovel makes the weight heavier at the end. (*Note:* Save your money - don't buy a fancy ergonomic shovel; studies have shown that in some models, the hook end is too deep. Twisting to unload a shovelful of snow with this tool may hurt your wrists.) Also keep one hand close to the base of the shovel to balance weight and lessen the strain on your back.

- *Timing is everything.* Listen to weather forecasts so you can shovel in ideal conditions. If possible, wait until the afternoon to shovel. Many disc injuries occur in the morning when there is increased fluid pressure in the disc because your body has been at rest all night.
- *Drink lots of water.* Drinking water frequently throughout the day helps to keep muscles and body hydrated. Be careful with hot drinks like coffee or hot chocolate. Coffee contains caffeine, which has a dehydrating effect and adds even more stress to the body.
- *Use proper posture.* When you do shovel, bend your knees and keep your back straight while lifting with your legs. Push the snow straight ahead; don't try to throw it. Walk it to the snow bank. Try to shovel forward to avoid sudden twists of the torso and reduce strain on the back. The [American Chiropractic Association](#) recommends using the "scissors stance," in which you work with your right foot forward for a few minutes and then shift to the front foot.
- *Take your time.* Working too hard, too fast is an easy way to strain muscles. Take frequent breaks. Shovel for about five minutes at a time and then rest for two minutes.
- *See your chiropractor.* Gentle spinal manipulation will help keep your back flexible and minimize the chance for injury. If you do overdo it, your chiropractor can help you feel better and prevent more injury.

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