

Are You Ready for Snow?

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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, winter will be upon us. 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. I like to share the following information with my patients every year. I will often format it into a handout for patients to take home or give out to others. You may want to edit or add a few more points depending on your practice style. Have a great winter!

Anyone who has shoveled snow knows how good a workout it can be. When you consider that the average shovel-full of snow weighs five to 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 it can also numb sensations of pain and fatigue. Unfortunately, pain is a sign that an injury has already occurred, or that you are doing something mechanically incorrect in shoveling the 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 that snow will not stick to it.

Do a warm-up before going out: A tight, stiff body is asking for injury. A few minutes of stretching can save you a lot of pain later. Don't forget to breathe when you are working. Holding your breath makes you tight and stiff.

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 also be cold.

Wear proper shoes: Plenty of cushioning in the soles will absorb the impact of walking on hard frozen ground.

Use a shovel that fits: 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.

Listen to weather forecasts so you have time to shovel: If possible, wait until the afternoon to shovel. Many disc injuries occur in the morning when there is an increased fluid pressure in the disc because your body has been at rest all night.

Drink water frequently to keep 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 the proper stance. 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 to 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 change the front foot.

See your acupuncturist: Care will help to keep your back warm and flexible, and minimize the chance for injury. If you overdo it, an acupuncturist can help you feel better and prevent more injury.

Take your time: Working too hard too fast is an easy way to strain muscles. Take frequent breaks. Shovel about five minutes and then rest for two.

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