



Avoiding Injuries While Shoveling Snow

By Michael Moschella PT., DPT., ATC

With winter time here, and with the ground being covered with snow already. It's time to get the snow shovel's out! Here are some facts and tips to help keep you safe and pain free as you shovel that snow.

According to the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission:

- In 2007, more than 118,000 people were treated in hospital emergency rooms, doctors' offices, clinics and other medical settings for injuries that happened while shoveling or removing ice and snow manually.
- More than 16,000 were injured using snow blowers.
- Types of injuries can include sprains and strains, particularly in the back and shoulders, as well as lacerations.

Regardless of age, back injuries due to snow shoveling can happen to anyone, not just to older adults. In fact, people between the ages of 20 and 50 are generally more likely than older individuals to injure their backs because they may not be aware that they are out of condition. With proper precautions and the correct snow shoveling technique, injuries to the shoulders and lower back can be avoided.

Here are several tips you should consider before, during and after shoveling to prevent an injury:

PEOPLE WHO SHOULD AVOID SHOVELING SHOW

- Sufferers of angina, other heart conditions and hypertension
- Those experiencing low back or neck pain

WHAT TO DO BEFORE SHOVELING

- Warm up by stretching your back and exercising your abdominals, legs and upper body muscles.
- Eat a healthy snack and drink water or a sports drink before shoveling to ensure you have adequate energy.
- Replenishing fluids and staying hydrated is extremely important, no matter how cold it is outside.
- Don't overdress because you'll warm up quickly.

WHILE SHOVELING

- Pace yourself, especially if the area you're shoveling is large, or you haven't been physically active in a while.
- Shovel for 5-10 minutes at a time, then rest to catch your breath and stretch your lower back, neck and shoulders.
- Use a shovel with a long handle to give you more control. Shovels with short handles are likely to increase the amount you bend your back and neck, causing low back and neck pain.
- For those not used to heavy physical activity, take half scoops rather than full scoops of snow.

AFTER SHOVELING

- Soreness is likely to be at its greatest 24-48 hours after shoveling.
- If you feel sore, do some light exercises. Keep active, and the soreness should be minimal.
- Ice and pain relievers such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen may be helpful.
- Use heat 24 hours later if needed.

Here are several biomechanical considerations you should consider before you start shoveling this winter.

Protect Your Back

As with any lifting, remember some basic techniques to prevent back pain/injury:

- Keep a wide, staggered base of support for balance and stability
- Lift with the legs not the back
- Head up
- Breathe freely while working—holding your breath when lifting increases stress on the body
- Keep the shovel and load close to the body. Take smaller scoops to avoid over lifting.

Protect Your Shoulders

- Scooping one handed, over lifting, over reaching can place significant forces on the shoulder.
- Joint or rotator cuff injury can.

Here are several full body stretches that are useful before you start shoveling



Move shoulders and upper back



Reach overhead



Elongate legs/hamstrings



Move lower back

We hope these tips and tricks will provide you with a happy and healthy winter season!

