

## PROTECTING YOUR BACK DURING THE WINTER SEASON

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The winter season is upon us and so is the inevitable arrival of snow and ice. Extra precaution must be taken during this time of year as snow removal and icy walking surfaces can contribute to an increased risk of back injuries. The good news is that proper safety measures can minimize these risks. Learn more about how to employ some basic essentials in dealing with snow and ice that can help keep your back healthy and injury free this winter season.



Snow shoveling can be a very physically demanding task. The average weight of one shovelful of snow can be anywhere from three to five kilograms. Repeated lift exposures, along with icy surfaces make the back vulnerable to injury. Improper lifting technique, awkward twists, slips and falls are also risk factors for back pain. Below are some simple rules that can be followed to help avoid and prevent injury during snow shoveling.

- 1. Warm up:** Before beginning any snow removal, prepare your body for physical activity by stimulating the joints and muscles, and increasing blood circulation. Climbing stairs, marching on the spot, or going for a quick walk around the block, can accomplish a warm up of five to ten minutes. Follow this with some gentle stretches and exercises for the back such as a knee to chest stretch, body hug, or standing back extensions. Wait at least 30 to 60 minutes after waking before taking part in moderate to intense physical activity. People are more likely to be injured early in the morning than later in the day as the biological tissues in the back become more flexible and accustomed to gravity.
- 2. Push, don't lift:** Push the snow to one side and avoid lifting. If you must lift, keep the shovel close to your body and avoid twisting and turning by positioning yourself to lift and throw straight at the snow pile. Be sure to lift slowly and smoothly and do not jerk with your lifts.
- 3. Bend the knees, keep the back straight and brace:** Use your knees, legs and arm muscles to do the pushing and lifting while keeping your back straight. Maintaining the natural and neutral curves of your back is important, as this is its strongest and most secure position. Contracting and bracing your abdominal muscles during lifting improves spinal stability and decreases the chance of injury.
- 4. Use the right shovel:** Use a lightweight, non-stick, push-style shovel. Separate your hands as much as possible on the shovel handle for better leverage against the weight of the snow.

5. **Dress for the job:** Wear warm clothing to protect yourself against the elements. Shoes and boots with solid treads and soles can help minimize the risk of awkward back twisting, slips and falls.
6. **Don't let the snow pile up:** Removing small amounts of snow on a frequent basis is less strenuous in the long run.
7. **Watch the ice:** Caution should be exercised around icy walkways and slippery surfaces. Intermittent thaws and subsequent freezing can give way to ice build-up under foot increasing the risk of back twisting, slips and falls. Coarse sand, ice salt, ice melter, or even kitty litter can help give your walkways and driveways more traction.
8. **Take a break:** Know your physical limits. If you feel tired or short of breath, stop and take a rest. Make a habit to rest for a moment or two every 10 or 15 minutes during shoveling. This is especially important if the snow is wet and heavy. Stop shoveling immediately if you feel chest or back pain.



Back pain is the second most common medical complaint, after the common cold. There are many biological tissues that can generate pain in the back. These may include muscles, ligaments, vertebral discs, bones, nerves, and joints. Quite often it is an injury to a combination of several or all of these structures that can manifest into back pain. For example, a lifting injury during snow shoveling may result

in muscle spasm, which is accompanied by a ligament sprain and joint irritation.

In the event that you suffer a back injury, it is important to recognize the early signs and symptoms, which may include: swelling, bruising, numbness, tingling, pain, and difficulty with movement. Ice should be applied on first signs of symptoms for 15 to 20 minutes at a time. Ignoring these early warning signs may result in chronic pain down the road. You should contact a licensed health professional who deals in the diagnosis and treatment of back pain, if symptoms do not subside. For more information, visit [www.nhwc.ca](http://www.nhwc.ca).

A little planning and know-how can go a long way. Following the above rules and safety tips concerning ice and snow removal during the winter season can greatly reduce the chances of physical injury to your back. The author would like to acknowledge the Ontario Chiropractic Association (OCA, [www.chiropractic.on.ca](http://www.chiropractic.on.ca)) in conjunction with their "Save Your Back While Shoveling Your Driveway" campaign, in the preparation of this educational information for use by its members and the public.

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