

SAFE GARDENING TIPS TO PREVENT INJURY

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Spring is upon us and so is the arrival of the gardening season. Raking, lifting, digging, and planting can be strenuous activities. Light to moderate gardening can burn between 300 and 400 calories an hour. Gardening and yard work can also challenge your muscles, strengthen your heart and lungs and improve flexibility, endurance and balance. As with any physically demanding task, special precautions must be taken to avoid injury. Repetitive lifting, improper lifting technique, awkward twists, repetitive work, prolonged postures, and improper use of tools are just several risk factors that can contribute to injury while gardening.

Improper gardening techniques can cause repetitive sprain/strain injuries throughout the body, but especially in the lower back, neck and shoulder regions. This can lead to re-occurring or chronic pain. Below are some simple rules that can be followed to help avoid and prevent injury during the gardening season.

- 1. Warm up:** Before beginning any gardening activity, 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 such as knee to chest stretch, forearm and wrist stretches, and 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. Use the right tools:** The sensible and safe use of well-designed tools can be an enormous help in reducing the possibility of injury. Make sure you select the correct tool for the task to be performed. Always make sure that tools are a comfortable weight and size for you. There are many ergonomically designed tools, which are lightweight with long padded handles and spring action mechanisms that can reduce strain and effort. Most garden centres have a wide selection of safe tools and will be glad to give advice and information.



- 3. Proper Lifting means 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. Avoid twisting and turning by positioning yourself accordingly. Be sure to lift slowly and smoothly with the load close to your body and do not jerk with your lifts. With heavier loads, use

a buddy or assistive device such as a dolly, cart, or wheelbarrow to help. Avoid heavy lifting after more than 15 minutes of bending or kneeling.

4. **Alternate activities and change positions:** Once you begin, take turns alternating between heavy chores such as digging, and lighter less physically demanding tasks such as planting, every 10 to 15 minutes. Avoid prolonged working postures. Changing hands frequently when you rake, hoe or dig prevents muscle strain and joint stress on one side of the body. Constant bending can put a strain on your back, neck and leg muscles and joints. Use kneepads or a kneeling mat to minimize the amount of bending required, and to make kneeling more comfortable.
5. **Dress and prepare for the elements:** Select comfortable, thick-soled, protective shoes that support your arches to reduce back pain and aching muscles. To protect from sun exposure, apply sunscreen, wear a wide-brim hat and drink plenty of water. Wear loose and comfortable clothing.
6. **Pace yourself:** Spread your work over several days and know your physical limits. If you feel tired or short of breath, stop and take a rest. Make a habit to drink water, rest or stretch every 10 or 15 minutes. Stop gardening immediately if you feel chest pain or persistent back or joint pain.



In the event that you suffer a back, neck, or joint injury while gardening, it is important to recognize the early signs and symptoms, which may include: swelling, bruising, numbness, tingling, pain, weakness 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 muscle and joint pain if symptoms do not subside. For more information, visit www.nhwc.ca.

Gardening can be very physically demanding and lead to injury if performed incorrectly or for a prolonged period of time. A little planning and know-how can go a long way. Following the above rules and safety tips can greatly reduce the chances of physical injury, and allow you to spring into gardening activity safely!

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