

Preventing back back this shoveling season

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Snowstorms are a time of excitement and wonder for a child: snowball fights, sledding and closed schools. For adults, it's the dreaded shoveling season complete with aching backs, frozen fingers or worse.

“Each year thousands of people are treated in emergency departments across the United States for heart attacks, broken bones and other injuries related to snow shoveling,” said Dr. Thomas Esposito, chief of the Division of Trauma, Surgical Critical Care and Burns, Department of Surgery, Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

Esposito recommends that people with a history of back or heart problems ask someone else to do the heavy shoveling. If you have to do it yourself, know your limits and don't overdo it.

“Shoveling is a very physical activity that is comparable to lifting heavy weights repeatedly and quickly,” said Kara Smith, special program coordinator for the Loyola Center for Fitness. “As with any exercise, it's important to begin with a five- to 10-minute warm-up.”

She suggests taking a brief walk or marching in place to get your body ready for the physical strain. Also, try adding arm movements and stretching your back to warm up the upper body.

Here are a few more tips to help you stay healthy during shoveling season:

1. Dress appropriately. Wearing layers allows you to adjust to the

temperature outside. When you are going to be outside for a long time, cover your skin to prevent frostbite.

2. Use a small shovel that has a curved handle. A shovel with wet snow can weigh up to 15 pounds. A small shovel ensures you have a lighter load, which can prevent injury.

3. Separate your hands on the shovel. By creating space between your hands, you can increase your leverage on the shovel.

4. Lift with your legs, not your back. Make sure your knees are bending and straightening to lift the shovel instead of leaning forward and straightening with the back.

5. Shovel frequently. Don't wait till the snow piles up. Shovel intermittently, about every two inches.

6. Push the snow. It is easier and better for your back to push the snow rather than lift it. Also, never throw [snow](#) over your shoulders.

7. Pace yourself. Take breaks and gently stretch your back, arms and legs before returning to work.

8. Stay hydrated. Drinking plenty of water is important when exercising regardless of the outside temperature.

9. Avoid caffeine and nicotine. These stimulants increase the heart rate and constrict blood vessels, putting a strain on your heart.

10. Avoid alcoholic beverages. Alcohol can dull your senses and make you vulnerable to hypothermia and frostbite.

“Each season has its own particular set of risks, but winter with its

snowstorms, plunging temperatures and wind chills can be especially daunting when it comes to safety,” Esposito said.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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