

# Protecting yourself from winter weather injuries

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Falls, frostbite, fractures: They are all potential hazards of icy winter conditions. But experts say there's a lot you can do to avoid injury when snowflakes fall.

## **First, stay warm.**

According to the New York City Department of Health, people lose the bulk of their body heat through their heads, so scarves, hats and hoods are essential.

Other trouble spots—especially for frostbite—are fingers, toes, earlobes and noses. So wearing mittens, gloves, hats and even scarves over the nose can be crucial when temperatures plummet.

Exertion causes sweating, and wet clothing "loses all of its insulating value and transmits heat rapidly," NYC health officials noted. So, they advise that you "change wet clothes frequently to prevent a loss of body heat" if sweating occurs. Water-resistant coats, pants and boots are another cold-weather must.

## **Keep alert to frostbite.**

Dr. Yelena Bogdan is an orthopaedic trauma surgeon and spokesperson for the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS). She said frostbite can happen "in minutes" if you're outside during extreme cold, and it can even occur when temperatures are above freezing, if there's a strong wind chill effect.

"Symptoms of frostbite include numbness, a frozen feeling on the skin or deeper tissue, and a waxy, white or grayish color," Bogdan and the AAOS explained in a review on winter safety.

If you or someone you're with shows signs of frostbite, seek shelter and "gently rewarm the affected area in warm [not hot] water for at least 30 to 45 minutes, or until the area feels warm and sensation returns," the AAOS said.

## **Take care when snow removal is a must.**

Blizzards can dump heavy snowdrifts on driveways and lawns, so be sure to have snowblowers, shovels, salt and sand at hand to help clear a path.

But snow removal comes with its own hazards, experts noted. NYC health officials advise some indoor stretching before you head out to shovel the white stuff. Keep your mouth covered when exerting yourself in cold weather.

Because shoveling puts a strain on the heart, risks for [heart attack](#) and other cardiac events can rise, and slips, falls and back strain are a hazard, too.

"To prevent injuries, use a shovel that is comfortable for your height and strength," the AAOS said. "Try to push the snow instead of lifting it. If you must lift, squat with your legs apart, knees bent and back straight. Always lift with your legs and avoid bending at the waist or throwing snow over your shoulder or to the side. This requires a twisting motion that stresses your back."

"Finally, start early and shovel often, rather than waiting for a big snowfall to finish, which can mean heavier lifting," the AAOS advises.

## **Be careful on the ice.**

It's tempting to skate or slide on a glistening iced-over river, pond or lake. But every year people fall through weak spots in the ice and drown.

NYC health officials advise citizens to stay off bodies of water that are frozen over, unless signs indicate that walking or skating is safe. Kids, especially, should never be unattended near ice.

If you are on ice and hear the telltale sound of cracking, immediately lie down flat on the ice to distribute your weight.

If you see someone who has fallen through the ice, never attempt to rescue them by yourself, the experts advised. Instead, the NYC experts said, "call 911 and notify the proper authorities. Be sure to give the exact location and an account of the incident."

## **Safeguard your winter sports**

Skiing, skating, snowboarding: All are fun, all are laden with potential risks for injury. The AAOS notes that, based on 2018 data, over 200,000 Americans find themselves in hospitals, ERs and doctors' offices each year due to winter sports injuries.

"When participating in your favorite winter activity, make sure to wear appropriate protective gear, including goggles, helmets, gloves and padding," the AAOS advises. "Know and abide by all rules of the sport in which you are participating and never go out alone."

If you're a ski enthusiast, stick to groomed ski runs and fight the temptation to head into areas that are not designated as official ski areas.

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