



## Easing the Pains and Strains of Shovelling Snow

Canadians are accustomed to shovelling snow. It is a regular winter activity that allows families to have fun outside while clearing snow; however, it can also be extremely strenuous on the body. There are an increased number of fatal heart attacks among individuals shovelling snow following heavy snowfalls. In addition, many people injure their back and shoulders from pushing and lifting heavy snow.

Prior to shovelling, it is important to avoid caffeine and nicotine as they are stimulants that place extra stresses on the cardiovascular system. In addition, avoiding large meals will decrease the likelihood of cramps. Ensure that you drink some water prior to beginning and dress in layers so that as the body temperature rises, you can remove a layer. Proper footwear is important for minimizing the risk of slips and falls.

Using an appropriate shovel is important! Many people still use large metal shovels. These are great for scraping snow, however, when it comes to lifting the snow, the added weight of the shovel increases the muscular stress on the back and shoulders. Plastic shovels are recommended since they are lighter. Ergonomic style shovels (with the bend in them) are a great option since they decrease the amount of forward bending. When choosing a shovel, ensure that the handle is set at mid chest level.

To help avoid injury, here are some important points to follow:

- Warm-up and stretch. Walk up and down the stairs a few times or take a walk around the block before any shovelling is completed. Whole body stretching should occur to help loosen muscles.
- Take breaks. Take a 5 minute break for every 15 minutes of shovelling. If you notice you are starting to breathe hard, it's time for a break. Stretch during the break to keep muscles loose.
- Use a large blade pushing shovel (about 20" wide) to move the snow to the side and a smaller shovel for lifting (about 12-14" wide). Avoid lifting with a large blade shovel.
- Push the snow to the side and then lift and throw it. Bend at the knees and take smaller quantities of snow rather than lifting huge shovels full of snow. Avoid throwing snow too far and never twist when throwing snow. Shovel early and often during large snow falls. Throw lighter snow further and earlier in the year to avoid having snow banks that are too high.
- Do not hold your breath when lifting. Breathe out when lifting and throwing.
- Ask for help if there is a large accumulation of snow.

For additional information, the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers Sudbury has a snow shovelling fact sheet that is available to anyone. This document contains additional strategies for avoiding injury while shovelling snow. Shovel safely.