

The Scoop on Safe Shovelling

Submitted by The Leeds, Grenville and Lanark District Health Unit

Most people know that shovelling snow can be very hard work, however sometimes people forget that it can also be a very dangerous activity. Every winter Canadians suffer injuries and heart problems from shovelling snow. Although shovelling snow can be a beneficial activity for a healthy individual, as it can help maintain or increase cardiovascular fitness, it can have severe health consequences for optimistic shovellers who take on more than they can handle. Some people don't realize that shovelling wet or heavy snow is equivalent to heavy weight training. A full shovel of snow can weigh as much as 11kg (25 pounds), and an hour of shovelling snow can use as much energy as running 15 kilometres. Breathing cold air, and being exposed to cold temperatures causes the heart to work even harder. On top of slips and falls there are several health risks associated with shovelling; heart attack, back injuries and cold weather related injuries.

It is very important to take the following precautions when shovelling.

Individuals over the age of 40, or those who are relatively inactive, should be especially careful.

- If you have a history of heart trouble, check with your doctor before shovelling
- Avoid shovelling after smoking or eating a heavy meal
- Warm up your muscles before shovelling by walking or marching in place, and do some stretches before and after shovelling
- Dress in layers so clothing can be peeled off as the body becomes warm as overheating puts an extra strain on the heart
- Push the snow in the same way a snowplow works, don't lift it.
- Stay hydrated by drinking water - in the cold air you can lose a lot of water through respiration and perspiration
- Take frequent breaks
- Use a shovel with a small scoop to keep the loads small and light
- Watch your posture – legs apart, knees bent, and back straight. Lift with your legs.
- Wear a hat, make sure hands and feet are warm
- Stop immediately if you feel tightness in your chest, shortness of breath, or pain of any kind.

If you are over 45, inactive, smoke, have elevated blood pressure, are overweight, and/or have any heart conditions, it may be best to err on the side of caution and get someone else to do the shovelling for you.