**Snow Shovelling Safety**

Winter has arrived with a blast in the London region – and snow removal is at the top of everyone’s to do list. Snow removal is important for safety reasons, in order to help reduce the potential for slip and fall injuries. However, snow shovelling itself is an activity with a variety of risks and benefits – similar to any other physical activity.

Snow shovelling is a moderate physical activity, with both cardiovascular and strength training components. It is recommended that everyone should aim for at least 30 minutes of physical activity at least three times per week. However, if you are a sedentary individual, snow shovelling may place sudden, intense physical demands on your body. Snow shovelling may cause a quick increase in heart rate and blood pressure – after only two minutes of snow shovelling, a sedentary person’s heart rate may rise to levels higher than those normally recommended during aerobic exercise. If you have a bleeding disorder, snow shovelling may also place extra strain on your muscles and joints – particularly if you are not accustomed to strenuous physical activity.

Those at greatest risk of injury during snow shovelling include: those with a history of heart disease; those with high blood pressure or high cholesterol; smokers; those who lead a sedentary lifestyle; and for those with a bleeding disorder, anyone with target joints, particularly in the upper extremities. For these individuals, if might be wise to consider using a snow removal service rather than jumping right into the snow drifts with your shovel. You can begin a moderate, slow paced exercise and activity program, so that next winter you will be ready to do your own snow removal safely.

To prepare for snow shovelling, talk to your family doctor regarding your overall physical health and well being. If you have a bleeding disorder, consult with the members of the comprehensive care team regarding any special precautions you might need to take; if you are on prophylaxis, continue with your routine prophylaxis schedule. Shovel at least one to two hours after eating and avoid caffeine before beginning. Stay hydrated by drinking lots of water. Dress in several layers of clothing so that you can remove layers as needed. Warm up your muscles and cardiovascular system before you begin – stretch your arms and legs; and walk or march in place for a few minutes before beginning.

Once you begin shovelling, start slowly and continue at a slow pace – don’t go overboard in the first few minutes of the activity. Try shovelling for 5 to 7 minutes, then resting for 2 to 3 minutes – continue to alternate this pace as you go (this is called interval training when we do it in a gym!). Shovel early and often – it is easier to shovel snow that is newly fallen as it is lighter and less heavily packed. Make sure you wear appropriate clothing – a hat, mittens or gloves, and boots with non skid soles – all to help prevent hypothermia and decrease the risk of slipping and falling.

Snow shovelling technique is important too! Try to push the snow with the shovel rather than lifting and throwing it – this is easier on your arms and back. Protect your back by lifting properly and safely: stand with feet at hip width for balance; hold the shovel close to your body; space hands apart on the handle to improve leverage; bend from your knees, not from your waist; tighten your stomach muscles while lifting; avoid twisting when lifting; walk to dump the snow rather than throwing it; alternate hand placement on the shovel. Spread sand, salt or kitty litter to improve traction and help melt ice.

Snow shovelling is a strenuous activity that may be stressful on your heart, joints and muscles. Stop shovelling and call 911 if you have discomfort in the chest, arms, or neck; unusual or prolonged shortness of breath; a dizzy or faint feeling; excessive sweating, nausea and vomiting. If you have a bleeding disorder, and think you may have suffered a bleed related to snow shovelling, stop shovelling and REST. Treat the bleed as you have been instructed to treat bleeds by the bleeding disorders program. Contact the program for further advice and instructions. Find someone else to finish the shovelling for you!

Remember, it’s only four months until spring!

Mary Jane Steele, PT, Physiotherapist

 Bleeding Disorders Program