



ERGO BULLETIN

Snow Shoveling Safety

Nationally, over 11,000 snow shoveling related injuries result in an emergency room visit every year. Shoveling snow and ice sometimes puts the spine in unnatural and compromised positions. It is crucial to avoid bending forward at the waist. Poor body mechanics can be even more pronounced during shoveling, as there can be a tendency to lower and lift with the back and twist at the waist to throw the load once upright again. The weight of the snow lifted and the sheer repetition of this winter time task potentially exposes the discs, ligaments and muscles to significant injury. Proper body mechanics can help reduce the chance of injury, and limit overall fatigue that can result from overexertion. As with any physical activity, it is ideal to properly warm up before getting started. Try to slowly elevate your heart rate and warm up your body by going for a walk first and/or gently stretching.



Seven Safety Tips for Shoveling Snow:

1. **Avoid lowering and lifting by bending at the waist.** Instead, stand upright with knees slightly bent and always keep the shoulders and hips in line. Keep the arms close to the body, with elbows bent throughout the movement to help reduce potential strain on the neck and shoulders.
2. **Use a strong grip on the shovel.** Keep the hands roughly 12 inches apart on the handle of the shovel. This helps to provide optimal leverage when attempting to lift snow. One hand should be positioned towards the end of the handle, while the other is placed closer to the blade.
3. **Avoid twisting at the waist when throwing or dumping a load of snow.** Instead, think about throwing the snow directly in front of where you want it to go, moving the arms forward in a low diagonal direction. Try not to overly extend your arms from your body or shrug your shoulders during this movement. An equally favorable option would be to walk over to the spot where you would like to deposit the snow and tilt the shovel sideways, letting it fall to the ground.
4. **Push rather than lift.** Whenever possible, simply push snow instead of continuously lifting it. This will help reduce the pressure on the back, neck, and shoulders associated with lifting. Pushing can also help to conserve energy and prevent fatigue.
5. **Engage the abdominal muscles as much as possible.** When consciously activated, the abdominals help to stabilize the spine and fortify a neutral alignment of the back. When lifting and tossing a load, try to gently tense your abdominals without holding your breath. Holding your breath during a forceful physical exertion can cause an elevation in blood pressure and place strain the cardiovascular system. Exhale during the most difficult part of any lifting activity.
6. **Keep the load within reason.** Lifting too much weight and risking overexertion can place strain on the spine no matter how strong body mechanics are during a lift. When trying to remove wet, heavy snow, try not to fill the shovel. Take smaller shovelfuls to reduce the overall weight associated with each lift.
7. **Avoid waiting for all the snow to fall.** If a long and deep snowfall is being forecast, try breaking up shoveling tasks when possible. Try to shovel snow every 2-4 inches, if a continuous fall is predicted throughout a given day.



One Beacon Centre • Warwick, RI 02886-1378 • 1.888.886.4450
For more information, contact Beacon Mutual's Loss Prevention Division
at 401.825.2731 or visit www.beaconmutual.com

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