

## Tips on Avoiding Injuries While Shoveling

With winter weather blanketing much of the Midwest, the **American Physical Therapy Association (APTA)** is concerned about reducing the number of injuries that may occur from shoveling snow. "Snow shoveling is a repetitive activity that can cause muscle strain to the lower back and shoulders, especially if a person is out of condition and does not lift properly," says APTA member Jan Richardson, PT, PhD, OCS.

### Tips to Avoid Winter Back Injuries

Richardson suggests the following tips for avoiding back injuries from snow shoveling:

- If possible, wait until the afternoon to shovel. Many slipped discs occur in the morning when there is increased fluid pressure in the disc because the body has been at rest all night.
- Lift smaller loads of snow, rather than heavy shovelfuls. Take care to bend your knees and lift with your legs rather than your back.
- Because the spine cannot tolerate twisting as well as it can other movements, it is important to avoid excessive twisting and forward bending. Instead, you should bend your knees and keep your back as straight as possible so you are lifting with your legs.
- Step in the direction in which you are throwing the snow. This will help prevent the low back from twisting and the "next-day back fatigue" experienced by many shovelers.
- Take frequent breaks when shoveling. Stand up straight and walk around periodically to extend the lower back. Do standing extension exercises by placing your hands on the back of your hips and bending backwards slightly for several seconds. Because you bend forward so much when shoveling, you need to reverse this by bending backwards.

Another way people injure themselves is by using a shovel with a shaft that is too short. This causes the back to bend more to lift the load. Also, using a shovel that's too long makes the weight at the end heavier. APTA suggests using a shovel with a shaft that lets you keep your back straight while lifting.

Back injuries due to snow shoveling can happen to anyone, not just to older adults. In fact, people between the ages of 20 and 50 are generally more likely than older individuals to injure their backs because they may not be aware that they are out of condition. With proper precautions and the correct snow shoveling technique, injuries to the shoulders and lower back can be avoided.

**For more information, contact the Wisconsin Physical Therapy Association at  
1-866-FOR-MYPT**