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LEAF OUT PAIN AND STRAIN

Canadian physiotherapists rake up a pile of tips for fall

Many Canadian homeowners spend hours raking leaves this time of year – it's a great way to get some exercise while enjoying the fall weather. Best yet – the yard looks better when you're done!

While raking can be a good way to enjoy moderate exercise, too much twisting, reaching, bending, lifting and carrying bags of leaves can place excessive loading on the spine, resulting in back strain or more serious injuries. The **Canadian Physiotherapy Association** (CPA) recommends using good posture and body mechanics as well as adopting a good technique for raking. It's also helpful to do warm-up exercises for the larger muscle groups such as the shoulders, back and the legs before (and after) all yard work.

Always wear loose lightweight clothing – layers of clothing help adjust to increased body temperature or changes in weather – and prepare for the day ahead with sunglasses, sunscreen and insect repellent as needed. Your shoes are important too – well fitting shoes with good soles will prevent slipping and give your back better support.

“Raking leaves is a physical activity that can often cause muscle soreness or injury,” remarks CPA member **Karen Oura** of Village Square Sport Physiotherapy in Calgary, Alberta. “The most common injuries I see are strains to the mid (thoracic) and lower (lumbar) back. I guide my clients through stretching exercises and a warm up that should be done before any raking, show them the proper body mechanics while raking and bagging the leaves, and advise them to break up a big job into smaller (20-30 minute) manageable pieces.”

The following recommendations by the Canadian Physiotherapy Association will help minimize the risk of strains and sore muscles:

RAKING TIPS:

- Hold the rake handle close to your body to help maintain good posture while raking. Keep one hand near the top for better leverage and use your arms and legs more than your spine. Ergonomic rakes, sold in garden centres across the country, have bent or side handles or handles that are padded for less strain on the hands and wrists. This design ensures that the elbows are bent slightly and also encourages good posture;
- Change sides frequently and avoid twisting from the waist. When raking, the tendency is to plant the feet in a fixed position and rake in several directions from that position. Instead, place one foot ahead of the other which allows you to shift forward and backward easily as you rake;
- Pace yourself. Section off larger yards so the job can be completed in stages rather than all at once;
- Take frequent breaks and/or change to a different activity.

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BAGGING TIPS

- When bagging leaves, lift manageable loads. Keep your back straight and use your legs to do the lifting. If you have to stoop, face the pile of leaves and don't twist as you lift;
- Don't try to overreach to get those last few leaves;
- When lifting the bag of leaves, tense your stomach muscles to give your back additional support and keep the bag close to the body. Keep your back straight while lifting with the legs;

- Don't pile too many leaves into one bag, especially if they're wet – it will be heavy and awkward to lift;
- When finished for the day, take a few moments to cool down by doing the same exercises performed prior to raking.

HEALTH TIPS

- Be proactive with the care of your spine – stay fit, stay healthy and engage in regular exercise so that fall and spring cleanup won't take as much of a toll. However if you do have limiting back pain, ask family or a neighbour to help, or hire someone to do it for you;
- If you have a heart condition or other medical concerns, consult your physician before raking;
- Active exercises such as gentle, progressive stretching of muscles may help relieve muscle stiffness and soreness;
- If soreness persists for a couple of days, consult a regulated health care practitioner

Physiotherapists are regulated health care professionals who have the knowledge and skills to help relieve pain, increase mobility, build strength, and improve balance and cardiovascular function. A physiotherapist will assess your injury and provide appropriate treatment to help get you back up to speed as well as give advice on how to prevent recurrence of injury.

For more information on raking, gardening or physiotherapy, visit the Canadian Physiotherapy Association's web site at www.physiotherapy.ca.

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