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# MEDIA RELEASE COMMUNIQUÉ DE PRESS

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## FORECAST PREDICTS 50 PERCENT SNOW, 70 PERCENT BACK INJURIES Canadian Physiotherapy Association has the scoop on safe snow shovelling

Back injuries and pulled muscles are among the potential health threats from using poor technique when shovelling snow. While most people recognize that shovelling snow is very hard work, and can put severe stress on your heart, fewer people recognize the stress and strain that it places on the low back.

Canadian physiotherapists say, "shovelling snow requires as much energy as running 15 kilometres per hour!" Although 15 minutes of snow shovelling benefits a healthy heart, maintaining or increasing cardiovascular fitness, most people don't realize that shoveling wet snow is like picking up heavy weights. One full shovel-load of wet snow can weigh as much as 25 pounds (11 kg).

Shovellers sustain injuries every year from repetitive twisting, improper lifting, over-exertion, or simply by trying to shovel too much snow. Many of these injuries can be prevented by taking the time to prepare and consciously think about how to move properly.

Shovelling can be made even more difficult by the weather. Cold air makes it harder to work and breathe, which adds some extra strain on the body. There also is the risk for hypothermia, a decrease in body temperature, if one is not dressed correctly for the weather conditions.

Cold tight muscles are more likely to strain than warm, relaxed muscles. The good news, however, is that physiotherapy can be helpful in relieving pain, speeding recovery time for quick return to normal daily activities and preventing the pain from worsening or recurring. Take time to stretch and prepare your body for activity with a simple warm up of marching on the spot and a few shoulder circles to help tackle the snow.

### The Canadian Physiotherapy Association offers the following tips to help get a handle on safe shovelling:

- **Choose a shovel that's right for you** – A shovel with an appropriate length handle is correct when you can slightly bend your knees, bend forward 10 degrees or less, and hold the shovel comfortably in your hands at the start of the shovel stroke. A plastic shovel blade will be lighter than a metal one, putting less strain on your spine; and sometimes, a smaller blade is better than a larger one. This avoids the risk of trying to pick up a pile of snow that is too heavy for your body to carry. Ergonomic shovels with a bent shaft are very good and have been tested by The Liberty Mutual Research Centre for Safety and Health in Hopkinton, MA. Researches found that when people use a bent shaft snow shovel they bend forward 16 percent less than they do with a straight shaft shovel, and your heart doesn't need to work as hard;
- **When you grip the shovel, make sure your hands are at least 12 inches apart.** This will increase your leverage and reduce strain on your body. Always keep one hand close to the base of the shovel to balance weight of the lift and lessen the lower back strain;

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- **Lift the snow properly** – Squat with your legs apart, knees bent and back straight. Lift with your legs. Do not bend at the waist. Scoop small amounts of snow into the shovel and walk to where you want to dump it. Holding a shovel of snow with your arms outstretched puts too much weight on your spine. Also, spray your shovel with a lubricant or silicon spray so the snow does not cling;
- **Step in the direction in which you are throwing the snow** – This will help prevent the low back from twisting and “next-day back fatigue” experienced by many shovellers;
- **Tackle heavy snow in two stages** – Begin by skimming off the snow from the top and then remove the bottom layer. Avoid overloading the shovel. You are working too hard if you cannot say a long sentence in one breath. If this is the case, take a short rest or decrease the intensity of effort slightly;
- **Take frequent breaks when shoveling** – Stand up straight and walk around periodically to extend the low back. Do standing extension exercises by placing your hands on the back of your hips and bend backwards slightly for several seconds. Because you bend forward so much when shovelling, you need to reverse this by straightening up and bending backwards slightly;
- **Dress warmly to conserve your body temperature.** For example, wear mittens (not gloves); wind-proof, water-resistant, many-layered clothing that will wick perspiration away from your body; two pairs of socks (cotton next to skin, then wool); and a scarf and a hat that cover the ears to avoid heat loss through the scalp.
- **Wear proper footwear** with good tread to help avoid slipping or falling;
- **If you have a health problem or are not in good shape, do not even consider snow shovelling.** Find someone ahead of time to help. Don’t wait until there is a lot of snow on the ground before you figure out how to remove it.

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