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PLAY IT SAFE – WINTER FUN WITHOUT INJURY

Winter enthusiasts look forward to this time of year when there's an abundance of winter activities to enjoy, like skiing, snowboarding, skating, snow shoeing, tobogganing, hockey and many other active pursuits. Before heading out to the ice, snow, trails or slopes, Canadians need to remember that winter activities often pose a higher risk of injury if time isn't taken in advance for proper body conditioning.

Canadian physiotherapists say they see clients with an increased number of 'impact' injuries in the winter, as opposed to the more 'repetitive-use' injuries seen throughout the rest of the year.

"I see a big influx in ski and snowboard injuries from both trauma and overuse at this time of year," says **Carl Petersen**, Canadian Physiotherapy Association member and author of *Fit to Ski*, published in May of last year. "After New Year, I'd estimate that two out of every 10 patients I see will be suffering from some on-slope mishap."

Among the most common winter sports injuries are separated shoulders, knee sprains, torn ligaments, pulled muscles and wrist fractures. These aren't seen only in couch potatoes who have become over-enthusiastic with the first snow fall. Even those who have been active throughout the summer can fall prey to the injuries of winter sports, mainly because the body's muscles need different conditioning for the flexibility and balance demanded by most winter activities. More than any other group of winter enthusiasts, skiers and snowboarders seem the most susceptible to injuries including strains, sprains and fractures.

"The most important thing to improve your training or ski-day and help guard against injury is to do a good dynamic warm-up before any activity – warm-up to ski, don't ski to warm-up," says Peterson. "Doing simple exercises like leg swings or slalom jumps help work on your balance plus core, hip, knee and lower leg strength."

The level of activity being exerted also needs to be realistic. Resist the urge to over do it, especially at the beginning of the winter season. The **Canadian Physiotherapy Association** suggests a good conditioning program prior to sharpening the skate blades or hitting the slopes to increase leg strength and endurance. Workouts to strengthen thighs, hamstrings, gluteals (buttock muscles) and abdominal muscles can also help.

As experts in movement and mobility, physiotherapists can help develop an exercise program specially-tailored to the individuals needs; putting together the right combination of activities to improve physical fitness and avoid injury.

The "ABC's of Smart Training"

A is for Alignment – People spend a lot of time in seated or contorted postures, which can affect postural alignment. This may limit the body's ability to achieve and maintain peak capacity and may lead to pain or injury. A physiotherapist can tailor a program of stretching and strengthening exercises to promote optimal postural alignment.

B is for Balance – Balance is a fundamental component of any sport, especially skiing. If you have a sedentary lifestyle, you may need to "train" your balance reactions for sport related activity. Most gym's have balance

equipment available. Use them to improve balance and ultimately enjoyment on the slopes.

C is for Core Training –Skiers and boarders need a strong core or torso as an “anchor” for the legs. These are the muscle groups that work together to stabilize the trunk. Exercises that have a rotational component and work the core areas in three dimensions are best. While many sports such as cycling, or weight training are one-dimensional, life and sports, like skiing, are 3-D so you must train for them. Canadian skier Thomas Grandi, winner of the Ski World Cup Giant Slalom 2004/2005 says, “I have found over the years that my most important asset physically has got to be the core. If the core isn't strong enough powerful legs become useless as the power is lost when the skier breaks at the waist. Not to mention injury prevention! ”

D is for Deceleration Control – Skiing and boarding are all about controlling the gravitational pull on frozen water. A typical ski turn usually lasts 2-3 seconds. Skiers must be able to control their deceleration speed to slow the forces of gravity and finish their run safely. Exercises that work the quadriceps in a slow controlled manner such as step ups, split squats and lunges are excellent ways to train for this. They mimic the forces of skiing and allow you to improve strength in a hip-extended position - the functional position for all sports.

For more tips and information, visit the Canadian Physiotherapy Association’s (CPA) bilingual web site at www.physiotherapy.ca,

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