

## Are You a Safe Shoveler?

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As the season turns, we are beginning to see some snow in the weather forecast. While for many people, snow means the return of outdoor activities such as skiing and skating, it also indicates the return of an often less enjoyable outdoor activity—shovelling. When done properly, shovelling can be a great full-body workout and a good way to incorporate time outdoors into your week. However, there can be some risks associated with shovelling. Shovelling is often done on slippery surfaces that increase risk of falls. As well, the movements required for shovelling are often not replicated in other activities. This means you may be moving your muscles in new ways that can lead to an increased risk of injury. Despite this, shovelling is a necessary chore for many people. If you will be shovelling this winter, it's best to be prepared. Below are some tips to ensure you and your equipment are ready for the winter.

### Is your shovel right for you?

Choosing the right shovel is an important first step. If you are planning to buy a new shovel this year or wondering if your current shovel is a good fit for you, here are some features you should keep in mind.

- ✳ **Handle length:** with the blade of the shovel on the ground, the handle should be approximately chest height. A handle that is too short will increase the amount of bending required and a handle that is too long will make the weight at the end feel heavier.
- ✳ **Blade material:** Metal blades, though durable and great for chipping ice, are heavy and can lead to back strain. In contrast, plastic blades are lightweight but much less durable than metal. A nice compromise may be a plastic shovel with a metal strip at the bottom.
- ✳ **Blade size:** Choose a size that matches the task and your physical capabilities. If you plan to push the snow, a wider blade may be fine. If you will be lifting the snow, you might want to switch to a narrower blade to decrease risk of injury.

### Before shovelling:

- ✳ **Layer up.** Once you start shovelling, you are likely to experience a rise in body temperature and it might be necessary to shed a layer of clothing. Reflective clothing may also be appropriate if shovelling before or after daylight.
- ✳ **Choose appropriate footwear for shovelling.** Proper footwear reduces your risk of falls while shovelling. This is particularly important as shovelling involves frequently transferring your weight. Warm boots that have a sole with good grip are the ideal shovelling footwear.
- ✳ **Warm up.** Just as you wouldn't jump right in to the most intense part of a workout without warming up, it



is important to warm up before shovelling too. Exercises such as squats or a brisk walk are ideal before shovelling. Stretches for your back, neck, shoulders, and legs may also be beneficial when preparing to shovel.

### Shovelling technique:

- ✳ **Feet:** your feet should be shoulder width apart, with one foot placed in front of the other. Change which foot is in front occasionally to prevent overuse of the muscles on one side of your body.
- ✳ **Legs:** Keep a bend in your knees.
- ✳ **Back:** Keep your back straight and use caution to not bend forward with your back, as this is a common cause of injury while shovelling. Avoid twisting through your back. If you need to turn to move the snow to the side, turn your whole body.
- ✳ **Hands:** your hands should be spaced apart on your shovel to increase your leverage.
- ✳ **Arms:** Hold the shovel close to your body.

### While shovelling:

- ✳ **Shovel early and often.** Especially for bigger snowfalls, don't wait until all the snow is on the ground and try to finish everything at once, as this is more likely to lead to injury related to overexertion. Breaking up the work over multiple bouts of shovelling can significantly reduce your risk of fatigue and injury.
- ✳ **Reduce lifting.** It is better to push the snow with your shovel than it is to lift and throw it. If you must lift the snow, make sure you are lifting with your legs, rather than your back. Walk to where you will dump the snow, rather than throwing the snow.

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- \* **Don't overload your shovel.** Pushing (or lifting when necessary) large loads of snow causes increased strain on your back. More frequent, lighter shovel loads are better than fewer, heavier loads. When shovelling wet, heavy snow, you may need to further decrease the load on your shovel.
- \* **Pace yourself** by taking breaks as needed. Don't wait until you are sore to take a break.

### **After shovelling:**

- \* **Stay hydrated.** Despite the cold temperatures outside, it is not hard to work up a sweat while shovelling. Make sure you drink plenty of water during breaks and after your

driveway and walkway are clear.

- \* **Stretch.** Even though you may feel like resting on the couch, it's important to take a few minutes to stretch after you're done shovelling. This will help your body to recover and reduce soreness later.

*NSTU's Early Intervention Program is available to members who are working or on paid sick leave and are experiencing an illness or injury. For more information on the Early Intervention Program, visit [nstuinsurance.ca](http://nstuinsurance.ca). To self-refer to the program, please email [nurse@nstu.ca](mailto:nurse@nstu.ca) or call 1-800-565-6788.*