

The Scoop on Shoveling Safely

If you're like most people, you probably don't give shoveling safety a lot of thought. You grab your shovel from the rack and start digging or moving material. However, each year many people experience back strains and muscle pulls related to shoveling.

There are some tricks to using a shovel that can minimize back stress and reduce the risk of muscle injury.

Shoveling is heavy physical exercise, much like weight lifting. You should stretch before maximum muscular exertion to prevent a muscle strain and tears in muscle fibers. Stretch and warm up. Bend forward, back, to the side and twist at the waist. Lift your arms to the side, bend your elbows and rotate arms forward and back a couple of times. Do some knee bends, straighten and bend your arms while flexing your biceps. Sixty seconds of warming up can help prevent a painful muscle strain.

Your body mechanics when using a shovel are important. Like an athlete, you need to think about technique if you want to prevent a muscle injury.

When digging and lifting with a shovel, keep your knees bent or flexed. Bending forward with straight legs increases low back stress.

Don't twist at the waist to throw material to the side. Move your feet to turn your body in the direction you want to throw the load.

Get close to the material that you're lifting with the shovel. The closer the load, the lower the back stress. Don't lift with your arms extended outward when raising a full shovel. If you can't get close, pull and slide the shovel close to you before lifting. Your elbows should be close to your body when lifting a full shovel. Keep your feet apart so the end of the shovel is between them when digging in.

Keep your back flat and knees flexed when straightening up to lift a load with a shovel. Lift with your legs, not with your back.

Brace the handle of the shovel on a bent leg to lift a heavy load. Employ leverage by using the bent leg as a balance point between the heavy end of the shovel and the handle. Push down on the handle to raise the end of the shovel.

The load doesn't have to be piled high. When lifting heavy material, pick up less to reduce the weight lifted. Pace yourself to avoid getting out of breath and becoming fatigued too soon.

Switch sides to give sore arms a break. Use the left hand to lift for a while, then switch to the right. Give over-used muscles a rest.