

## **Safe Snow Shoveling** **by Ryan and Joanna Sleik**

Although delayed, it does appear that winter is well upon us and that the great winter sport of snow shoveling has begun. Somehow shoveling seems to produce more injuries than opening day at the ski hill. Learning to shovel safely can help prevent injury and ensure that you make it through the season enjoying your new sled or snowboard and not with a frozen bag of peas cooling off your aching back or shoulder.

Shoveling can be an injury prone event because it involves movements that we are not well practiced in. Not only are we putting our backs and shoulders to more exercise than they typically get during the other seasons but we typically shovel snow in epic sprints in an effort to get the job done.

I look at snow shoveling as an excellent way to get some exercise and to practice good body mechanics. Yes, being a physiotherapist I do tend to think a little differently but consider that you are working your arms, back, shoulders, legs and even your ankles all at once (and for free)! The following guidelines and suggestions can help keep you shoveling pain-free this season.

1) Warm up your body first! Treat your body like a cold car in the winter, no I don't mean plug it in, I mean let it idle a touch so the engine is ready before you take off. Start with a small easy job such as your steps or landing before tackling the deep stuff. Warming up helps to get your heart, muscles and joints ready for the job ahead.

2) Know your weak points! If you have a tricky shoulder, avoid movements that normally cause you pain. Shovel and push the snow in front of you rather than trying to throw it constantly over your shoulder. If you are comfortable with the over the shoulder technique, I would suggest alternating which shoulder you throw it over. Try to keep your shoulder blades back and prevent your upper back from curving forward. This will help keep you shoulders in a better alignment to prevent injury.

3) Watch your back! To protect the back it is important to remember good lifting mechanics. Just bending at the knees doesn't always do the trick. Spinal stability involves holding the spine in a stable posture while moving it through it's available range of motion. Problems occur when we exceed the stable range of motion in the spine or when our muscles are not strong enough to adequately support our spine. The body will go into a protective mode by creating an intense muscular response if it feels that damage may ensue, this is known as a back strain. Learning how to build your core strength with specific strengthening exercises and to avoiding prolonged awkward positions can prevent you from injury.

Progressively building your endurance to snow shoveling, paying attention to your movement, and maintaining good spinal control and posture will help keep you on your feet throughout the winter months. Practice these simple tips and enjoy a healthy and happy winter season in the snow!