

WINTER ACTIVITIES

by Dr. Brian S. Seaman, DC, FCCSS(C), FICC

The Maritimes can certainly be a Winter Wonderland! White snow carpets our lawns and decorates our trees and shrubs, as the sunlight makes it sparkle, creating a beautiful opportunity for photographs.

However, the Winter time also brings back memories of snow shoveling. This activity can certainly be hazardous to your health, especially your lower back. Although it looks light and fluffy, a shovel full of wet snow can weigh quite a bit. If lifted improperly, it can cause considerable pressure on your lower back. Lifting and twisting improperly can strain a muscle, sprain a ligament, irritate a spinal joint, or even worse, cause a disc herniation (“slipped disc”). As chiropractors, we often see the results of poor shoveling techniques which can cause neck, shoulder and back pain, or shooting pains into the legs. Heaving that shovel full of snow the wrong way can put you out of action for quite a while. It is best to take your time, use long handled shovels, and take smaller shovel loads. Pushing a scoop, or scraper, also reduces the amount of lifting which you have to do.

Aside from snow shoveling, Winter is also a time when many people tend to stay indoors to avoid the cold, and icy conditions. As a result, your fitness levels can decrease, and along with this, there is a tendency to gain weight – especially over the holiday season and New Year’s!

But, staying active during the Winter may not be as hard as you think. Although walking can certainly be treacherous, especially with ice and the sidewalks people fail to clear, there are other ideas to consider. Many of my patients venture out to the local malls several times a week and make a “day of it”. They meet friends for a coffee (or tea juice, or hot chocolate), go for a brisk walk around the mall, and then have lunch.

If a mall is not nearby, or transportation is a problem, you should speak to your health care professional about specific ideas (based on your health status) that you can do at home in order to maintain your fitness. One great way of starting a home based exercise program is by visiting www.fitin15.ca. This gives you simple but effective ideas to help create a basic exercise program which you can do inside during the winter months.

If walking outside be sure to dress warmly and wear good boots with a non-slip tread. You may also want to try the new slip-on spikes which are advertised. Also pick your route carefully – generally the sidewalks along main streets are kept much clearer and well salted/sanded to remain ice free.

Be sure to take a pair of sunglasses when you go outside. The glare of a sunny day off the snow can be very uncomfortable for your eyes and may result in a headache. The glare may also cause you not to see a patch of ice on the sidewalk before it’s too late!

If you like getting out to the pool, many facilities (some with warm water pools) have water exercise classes which are easier on the hips and knees, especially if you suffer from arthritis.

Regular activity is good for everyone especially as we get older. It is important to maintain your body weight (it gets harder to lose weight as we get older) and keep a reasonable level of fitness. Regular physical activity can also help offset the effects of osteoporosis. Exercise which is weight bearing (such as walking) will help to maintain your bone density. If you have not had a bone density study (especially if you are a woman), ask your family physician if you should have a base-line study done.

So as you can see, there are many ways to stay active during the Winter season. An active body helps to keep us healthy both mentally and physically. On the up-side, Spring follows the Winter. We have to stay active so that we can get out into the garden in a few months!

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