

Cardiac Health Risks of Shoveling Snow

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Many of us view snow removal as just another necessary evil. Unfortunately, some of us must view shoveling snow as a health risk. Shoveling during winter temperatures can pose a higher risk for heart-related incidents including heart attack or sudden cardiac death. People in a higher risk group should think twice before grabbing the snow shovel and heading out to the driveway. The higher risk group includes individuals with cardiovascular disease (previous heart attack, by-pass surgery, stroke); people with a history of chest pain or angina; people with high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or diabetes; those who have lung disease or who smoke; and people who do not exercise regularly.

Why are we cautioned about shoveling snow, but rarely told not to shovel dirt? One of the main reasons is due to the typical winter temperatures. Heart rate and blood pressure tend to catapult to high levels, as they do with most strenuous activities. However, when coupled with the body's natural reflex to constrict blood vessels when exposed to colder temperatures, that strenuous activity places an ever-higher demand on the heart. This can become a recipe for a heart attack.

Other factors that can spell disaster for someone that chooses to shovel snow include tobacco use (nicotine constricts blood vessels just as cold air does), caffeine (which can increase your heart rate and cause vessel constriction as well), failing to stay well-hydrated (with water!), and failing to treat shoveling as an exercise bout. A typical exercise bout should include a warm-up to modify cardiovascular strain and help to prevent musculoskeletal strain or injury. During the exercise you should pay attention to how hard you are working, and keep it moderate. Take rest breaks to hydrate, and don't try to clear a large area in a short time. Other weather considerations include protecting extremities such as nose, ears, hands and feet. Cold weather can reduce circulation, aggravating heart disease. Also, you should breathe through a mask or light scarf to help warm and humidify the air before it reaches your lungs.

If you know that you have heart disease, you should arrange for some other method for snow removal besides shoveling. Hire a service that uses plows or snowblowers, for example. There is a problem in assuming that you do not have heart disease as, sadly, sometimes the first, last, and only symptom of coronary distress is sudden cardiac death. Therefore, we should all be cautious regarding the potentially threatening cardiac demands of snow shoveling.

To reiterate, if you have no other option for snow removal, treat shoveling as any other vigorous, demanding exercise and pace yourself. Warm up with some type of light activity (walking or marching in place); use proper body mechanics (avoid twisting, and bend at the knees rather than the back); take frequent rest breaks; and stay hydrated. Most importantly, know the warning signs of a heart attack. Stop immediately and call 911 for emergency help if you have symptoms such as chest pain, shoulder, neck or arm pain, shortness of breath, dizziness, fainting, extreme sweating or nausea.