

Shoveling Snow Can Increase Your Risk for a Heart Attack

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DENVER, CO — The heavy, wet snow that commonly falls in autumn is often called “heart attack snow,” because the great effort required to move it can increase your risk of having a heart attack. Repeatedly lifting a shovel full of heavy snow can be more strenuous than running on a treadmill.

“If you’re out of shape, you wouldn’t just hop on the treadmill and set it to the fastest speed,” said Andrew Freeman, MD, cardiologist at National Jewish Health. “For those already at high risk, it’s an extremely taxing activity.”



Unlike conventional exercise, shoveling is usually done without a warmup and can cause sudden increase in blood pressure and heart rate. Additionally, cold air may cause constriction of blood vessels, including coronary arteries, and decrease oxygen supply to the heart. Together, these factors can increase the heart’s workload and cause a heart attack. Dr. Freeman offers the following tips on how to protect yourself and still get the snow shoveled.

Don’t shovel first thing in the morning. Most heart attacks occur first thing in the morning, when your blood is most likely to clot. Give yourself time to get up and moving before going out and grabbing the shovel. You’ll also give the sun a chance to warm up things a bit.

Warm up before shoveling. Shoveling snow is exercise. It’s hard work. Take a few minutes before to stretch, move about and get the ‘blood flowing’ before undertaking any strenuous activity, including shoveling snow.

Use a smaller shovel. A shovel full of wet snow is especially heavy when the shovel is big. It may take a little longer, but many small loads will be better than fewer heavy ones.

Dress appropriately. Cover your hands, head and mouth. Covering your mouth with a scarf will help you inhale warmer air and can help avoid respiratory problems.

Shovel in shifts. If you need a rest, take a rest. Taking 15 minute breaks can help lessen the load on your heart.

Watch for warning signs. Tightness in the chest, lightheadedness and dizziness are all signs of a heart attack. If you suspect you’re having a heart attack, call 911.

National Jewish Health is the leading respiratory hospital in the nation. Founded 121 years ago as a nonprofit hospital, National Jewish Health today is the only facility in the world dedicated exclusively to groundbreaking medical research and treatment of patients with respiratory, cardiac, immune and related disorders. Patients and families come to National Jewish Health from around the world to receive cutting-edge, comprehensive, coordinated care. To learn more, visit the media resources page.

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