

Why shoveling can be fatal

Aside from the minor complications of frostbite, sore muscles and low back strain, snow shoveling can be deadly. During winter, these news reports are common:

"Nine men from the county collapsed and died yesterday while cleaning snow from their homes. The deaths brought to 13 the number of weather-related fatalities since frigid air and heavy snow slashed into the Midwest Tuesday."

The link between snow shoveling and heart attack is probably no coincidence. Snow shoveling is an extremely strenuous activity, requiring seven to nine times as much energy as resting.

THE STRAIN of shoveling is compounded by the disproportionate heart rate and blood pressure responses that occur with arm exercise, isometric exertion, and the inhalation of and exposure to cold air.

Arm exercise is associated with higher heart rate and blood pressure responses than leg exercise. Consequently, arm work is deceiving as it creates an excessive demand on the heart.

Isometric exertion, sustained muscle contraction with little or no movement, occurs when one strains to lift or push heavy loads. Blood pressure increases dramatically. Unfortunately, the cardiovascular demands of isometric exercise are dangerously camouflaged, so the usual warning signs of overexertion — such as rapid heart rate, sweating and breathlessness — are absent.

Finally, exposure to cold air further increases blood pressure, while breathing cold air may evoke a reflex narrowing of the heart's own blood vessels.

Among persons with heart disease, these stresses may lead to an inadequate oxygen supply to the heart muscle, perhaps with chest pain, irregular

Barry Franklin

and potentially dangerous heart rhythm, or both.

HERE ARE several general and specific recommendations:

1. Elderly persons, people with high blood pressure, or those with a history of heart disease simply should not shovel snow.

2. The older you are — particularly over age 40 — the more you need to pace yourself. Adopt an interval or work-rest approach. Take frequent breaks.

3. Avoid sudden strenuous exertion. Begin your shoveling gradually.

4. Lift small loads rather than large, heavy loads.

5. Wear a winter mask or scarf to avoid inhaling cold air and to protect the face and neck from exposure.

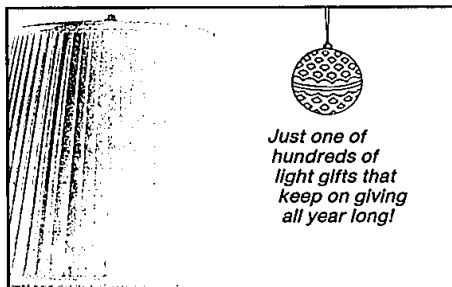
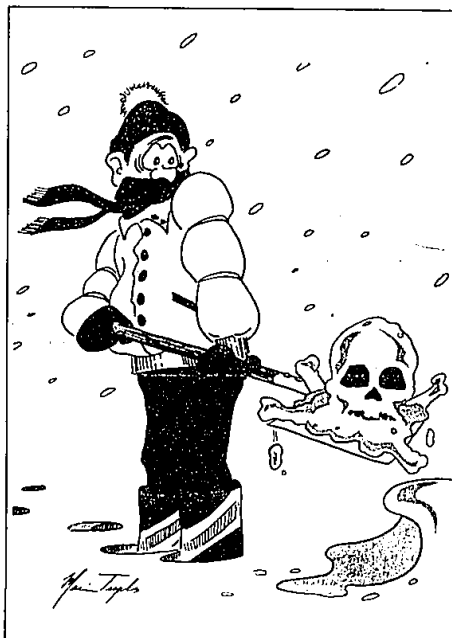
6. Avoid large meals, alcohol and tobacco both before and after shoveling.

7. Reduce the shoveling rate when working with heavy (wet) snow.

8. Cut out and attach this label to your snow shovel:

WARNING: Use of this shovel for snow removal may be hazardous to your health.

A Farmington Hills resident, Franklin teaches in the Wayne State University medical school and works in cardiac rehabilitation at Sinai Hospital.



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