

Don't be flaky.

Snow shoveling takes some smarts

On a cold winter night nearly 20 years ago, our department chairman, then approaching 60, went outside to clear his driveway of snow. After 45 minutes, he returned to the warmth of his home and mentioned to his wife that he wasn't feeling very well.



fitness
Barry Franklin

Perhaps he'd feel better if he just treated for awhile? He went upstairs to the bedroom to heed her advice. A short time later she found him dead. The coroner concluded that a massive heart attack had killed him.

Was this a freak occurrence? Would he have died anyway that evening? I don't think so.

The association between snow shoveling and heart attacks is probably no coincidence. Unfortunately, reports of snow shoveling deaths are common.

SNOW SHOVELING is an extremely strenuous activity that combines pushing, lifting, turning and throwing. If you shovel light snow at the rate of 10 "throws" a minute, you're expending as much energy as if you were playing a match of singles tennis. On the other hand, heavy snow requires the energy equivalent of running at a nine-mile-per-hour pace.

For the person who is out-of-shape and unaccustomed to vigorous physical activity, these levels of energy expenditure may require Herculean efforts.

But snow shoveling doesn't just make you tired. It also places huge demands on your heart in five ways. These include the strain of upper body exercise, prolonged standing, with little leg movement, isometric exertion, breath holding, and the inhalation of and exposure to cold air.

THESE FACTORS, singly and together, create a disproportionate heart rate and blood pressure response to effort. They drastically increase the demands of the heart for blood and oxygen. At the same time, breathing cold air may trigger a reflex spasm or temporary narrowing of the heart's own blood vessels. Among people with known or latent heart disease, these effects may lead to a lack of oxygen supply to the



Snow shoveling has many hidden dangers.

heart muscle, chest pain, or potentially dangerous heart rhythm disturbances.

Can we identify the individual who is at increased risk? Yes. The person over 45 who's inactive, who smokes, who has an elevated blood cholesterol level, who is overweight or who has high blood pressure or a heart condition is the one that's most likely to suffer a heart attack. People with one or more of these characteristics would be well-advised to hire someone else to do their snow shoveling.

TO MAKE the job much easier, you should consider buying a snow blower, preferably one with an electric starter. These machines are relatively inexpensive, and very efficient.

If you must shovel the old-fashioned way, make sure you:

- Pace yourself. Adopt a work-rest approach by taking frequent breaks.
- Use your legs, as well as your arms. In lifting the snow, keep your knees slightly bent when pushing or lifting the shovel.
- Lift small loads more often, using a short shovel with a small scoop.
- Wear a cold weather breathing mask or scarf to avoid inhaling cold air or exposing the face and neck to it.
- Avoid large meals, alcohol and tobacco, both before and after shoveling.
- Try not to shovel when it's windy. The wind-chill factor may be much lower than your thermometer indicates.
- Dress in several light layers rather than one heavy layer. This allows you to take off or put on clothing as you work. Dressing too warmly can cause overheating and impose additional strain on your cardiovascular system. And, remember to wear a hat.

Finally, as a reminder of the potential danger of snow shoveling, cut out and paste this label to your snow shovel:

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

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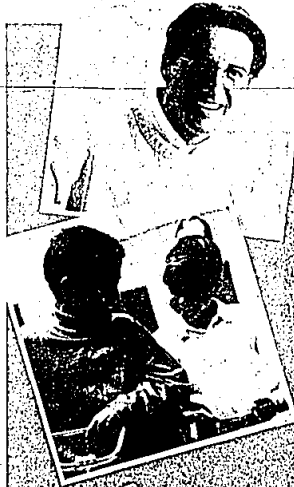
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