

# Avoiding the injuries of winter

By Jim Cornelius  
Editor in Chief

Winter in Sisters Country is a season of beauty and it can offer a lot of fun — but it can also ding you up if you don't watch out.

Whether it's a fall on the slopes or just walking to your car, whether it's the strain of too much time on the Nordic trails or too much time behind the snow shovel, winter is a season of injury in Sisters.

Matt Kirchoff of Therapeutic Associates told *The Nugget* last week that his practice is starting to see the typical injuries of the season — mostly shoulder and lower back trouble from people working in that last dump of heavy, wet snow.

Turns out that shoveling snow is one of the most fraught of winter activities. A story recently made the media rounds with a doctor positing that if you're over 45 years old and have any symptoms of chest discomfort or heart trouble, you shouldn't be shoveling snow at all.

Beaumont cardiologist Dr. Barry Franklin said, "You've got a perfect storm here. You're asking the heart to do a tremendous amount of work, and you're simultaneously increasing heart rate, blood pressure, and constricting the coronary arteries. Every year we lose 1,000 to 1,500 individuals across the U.S. who died suddenly while shoveling heavy, wet snow, and we want to try and prevent that in the future."

There are those of us well on the other side of 45 who continue to wield the snow shovel and aren't willing to hang it up. But no matter how "in shape" we feel like we are, we can run ourselves into trouble, so it's wise to take some precautions.

Shoveling snow is an athletic activity — and we should treat it that way. Instead of getting up off the couch, chugging down a mug of coffee, and heading out into the cold, we should take a bit of time to warm up.

Some "prehab" work like stretching and foam rolling can help prevent shoulder and back impingement. Warm up to the work — don't just walk out and start going at it like John Henry trying to beat a steam drill. That really is asking for trouble — just ask John Henry.

Pace yourself and take frequent breaks. It's easy to get dehydrated during winter activities, because we sometimes don't feel as thirsty when it's cold. Make sure you're taking on plenty of fluids.

The kind of fluffy snow we got around Christmastime is pretty easy to deal with — and it's always better to push the snow out of the way rather than lifting shovelfuls and heaving. The heavy, wet snow that came in at the end of the month is the kind that can hurt you.

Push it when you can, lift it

if you must.

Take small bites. A full, heavy load at the end of a snow shovel — which is not the most ergonomic tool ever developed — requires a lot of leverage to move. If you're relying on your back to do that over and over again — from a stooped-over position — you're going to get hurt. Don't hold your breath when you lift.

Shift the direction in which you shovel, so you're not making the same motion over and over again.

A heavy load at the end of a shovel is hard on the shoulders, too. The higher we lift the shovel, the harder it is on the shoulders, so avoid trying to throw a big load over the top of a tall berm.

Raking snow off a roof with your arms up over your head can wreak havoc on the shoulders. Good rehab and range-of-motion exercises before work can help, but be mindful of not over-taxing the shoulders and doing too much awkward reach-and-pull.

Just walking around in snowy, icy conditions can be dangerous. Falls account for a whole lot of injuries in winter. The old adage to "walk like a penguin" is a good one.

Hold your arms out to your side



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Warm up before shoveling snow. "Prehab" work like stretching and foam rolling can help prevent shoulder and back impingement.

(don't walk with your hands in your pockets), bend your knees a little, and shuffle side-to-side rather than striding out. If you do slip and fall, especially backward, tuck your chin so your head doesn't hit the ground.

Over-shoe traction devices like Yak Trax can really help keep traction when it's slick. Yes, they're a pain to keep putting on and taking off, but much less of a pain than a visit to the emergency room.

If your back or shoulders or other parts start barking at you, don't just pop down

some ibuprofen and ignore it.

"Don't be afraid to ask for help," said Megan Rheeder, a physical therapist and athletic trainer who works at Green Ridge Physical Therapy and Wellness in Sisters.

Trying to tough out an injury just makes it worse and lengthens recovery time, taking away from time we want to be having fun in Sisters' winter wonderland.

Kirchoff concurs.

"The quicker we see somebody after an injury, the quicker we can address it," he said.

## Falling down in Sisters

During the month of December, the Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District responded to 16 emergencies related to falls. That is a fall every other day during the month, and only four of which were related to weather.

The World Health Organization reports that each year an estimated 684,000 individuals die from falls globally. Adults over the age of 60 years of age suffer the greatest number of falls. Out of the 16 patients the fire district responded to in December, only three were under the age of 60. Over half of these patients required transport to a hospital for further testing/treatment.

Falls can cause broken bones and serious head injuries. Head injuries can be very serious for people who take blood thinners. Many people who fall become afraid of falling and that fear can cause them to alter their everyday activities. Less activity actually causes weakness, which increases the chances of falling according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Factors that increase your chance of falling include:

- Lower body weakness.
- Vitamin D deficiency.
- Difficulty with walking or balance.
- Certain medications that may affect balance.
- Vision problems.
- Foot pain or improper footwear.
- Home hazards like broken or uneven steps, and throw rugs or clutter.

Most falls occur due to a combination of factors and can increase during winter weather.

### TAKE STEPS TO PREVENT FALLS:

- Talk to your doctor to evaluate your risk, review your medicines and supplements.
- Do strength and balance exercises.
- Have your vision checked.
- Make your home safer.

The Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District offers home safety inspections free of charge for residents in Sisters and Camp Sherman. You can schedule a home safety inspection by calling 541-549-0771, or online at <https://www.sistersfire.com/home-safety-program/>.

Tai Chi can assist all ages and abilities with balance, flexibility, stress relief, and overall health. Shannon Rackowski teaches a free Tai Chi class on Mondays from 11:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. The class is sponsored by Sisters Drug. Her studio is located in the Ray's Complex in Sisters, and you can sign up for classes by calling 541-272-0529. Rackowski is also starting a new Balance Class on Wednesday, January 19. The balance classes will last an hour and will be for six weeks. To sign up, please contact Shannon at 541-272-0529.

Tai Chi is also offered through Sisters Park & Recreation District. See [www.sistersrecreation.com](http://www.sistersrecreation.com) for more information.

For more information about how you can prevent falls, call Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District at 541-549-0771.

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