

How to Keep Winter From Taking a Toll on Your Back By **JANE E. BRODY**

This is your back speaking, and now is the winter of my discontent. With all the snow and ice and cold that have descended on much of the country, there are so many ways I can get hurt. So I want you to know what you can and should do to protect me and keep yourself out of debilitating and disabling pain, now and in the future.

This is especially important if you've already experienced back pain or, worse, [sciatica](#). But even if your back has been perfectly healthy until now, it's important to know how to keep it that way.

[Low back pain](#), with or without [sciatica](#) ([leg pain](#) when sciatic nerve roots are pinched), is extremely common, afflicting 70 percent of people at one time or another. Next to [headache](#), it is the most common medical complaint, and next to the [common cold](#), it is the most frequent reason for missed work.

Winter brings on more than the usual back hazards. There's all that shoveling — especially this year, in the East and Midwest. There are the cars that get stuck and need to be pushed to freedom. There are the icy patches, including black ice and ice disguised by a thin layer of snow, on walkways and stairways and in crosswalks. And there is the tendency to hibernate and perhaps slack off on physical activities that can strengthen and tone muscles that support the back and protect it from injury.

The following guidance comes primarily from Dr. Preston J. Phillips, an orthopedist and sports medicine specialist in Tulsa, Okla., who happened to visit New York City during the mid-January storm that brought us 19 inches of snow, giving him firsthand knowledge of what real snowbirds face.

Dr. Phillips is co-author, with Dr. Augustus A. White III, professor of orthopedic surgery at Harvard Medical School, of “Your Aching Back: A Doctor’s Guide to Relief” (Simon & Schuster; updated in 2010), an extremely helpful book complete with drawings of safe ways to move and exercise that are easy to incorporate into nearly every life.

SHOVELING Cardiologists suggest that men over 50 and women over 60 should leave snow shoveling to younger folks. But yours truly, and many of my neighbors, pay no heed. In fact, despite my rather iffy back, I’ve found that shoveling, properly done, enhances my strength and muscle tone and actually protects my back.

The tricks, according to Dr. Phillips: Bend from your knees, not your back; don’t overload the shovel; remember that wet snow is heavier than the fluffy kind; shovel in short intervals and rest in between; and don’t twist.

Instead move your feet, put one foot forward and face the direction you’re going to throw the snow. Above all, as the doctor said in an interview, “don’t be macho — hire the kid

down the street or use a snowblower.”

GETTING THERE Allow extra time to get places. Do not run or race-walk to catch a bus or train or to get to work on time. Be especially careful on stairs; use the handrail and watch your step. If you must use a bicycle for transportation, look for cleared roads to ride on, even if the route is longer. Black ice and slush are especially treacherous for cyclists.

STAYING UPRIGHT I’ve been appalled to see what some very elderly men and women have been wearing on their feet this winter — flimsy, treadless shoes that are herniated discs, fractured spines or broken hips (or worse) waiting to happen.

Soles of shoes or boots should grip the snow or ice. There are several products that can turn ordinary shoes into cleats. They include GripOns, Yaktrax Walkers, STABILicers and DryGuy MonsterGrips, sold in sporting-goods and shoe stores and on the Internet.

“A walking stick or cane can provide added stability,” Dr. Phillips said. And to avoid straining your back, use a long-handled shoehorn to put boots on — and a boot jack (a wood or iron device with a U-shaped mouth to grip the heel of the boot) to take them off.

PUSHING CARS First, try to improve traction using branches, cardboard, sand or cat litter under the wheels. If pushing is required, the doctor said, “get three or more people to push the car out.”

He also endorsed a good-neighbor policy: “If you see someone having difficulty, offer to help if you can — and if you’re the one who needs help, accept it when offered.” (When my loaded shopping cart got stuck in a mound of snow at an intersection, a kind — and strong — stranger picked it up and carried it over the obstacle.)

CARRYING When navigating uncertain surfaces, it’s critically important to watch where you’re stepping and keep your balance. Don’t carry too many packages from the store or car at once; better to make extra trips.

Also, equalize the load on both sides of your body. When lifting heavy packages from the car, first move them close to your body and bend from the knees to pick them up. If you must carry a young child, use a sling or backpack carrier. If instead the child is in a stroller or carriage, avoid sudden twists and watch for ice ahead.

CLEANING AND CLEARING Winter, when the body stiffens against the cold, is not the best time to clear your yard of tree limbs and branches. “Unless they’re obstructing your path or are a risk to your home,” Dr. Phillips said, “leave them until the weather warms up.”

If the roof develops a leak, call a professional; climbing on a wet, icy or snow-covered roof “is a recipe for disaster,” he said.

KEEPING STRONG Though it's tempting to hibernate in the cold, this is no time to slack off on exercises that protect your back and your entire body, from your shoulders to your shoes.

“If you have good muscle tone over all, your muscles are better able to compensate for problems in the lower back,” Dr. Phillips said. As he and Dr. White wrote, the crucial components of a good exercise program are “regularity, trunk muscle strengthening and endurance, and palatability.”

They recommend walking, cycling (indoors or out) and swimming, in any combination, as the best all-around activities for people with back issues. Proper technique is critical; sit-ups should not be done with straight legs or feet hooked under something.

Isometric exercises that strengthen abdominal muscles can be done at almost any time: “Tighten your throat, bowel and bladder muscles; then press hard as if you were trying to have a bowel movement, and concentrate on tightening your abdominal muscles.”