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POND VIEW PROFESSIONAL PARK
301 PROFESSIONAL VIEW DRIVE
FREEHOLD, NJ 07728
PHONE: 732-720-2555 • FAX: 732-720-2556

RENAISSANCE CROSSING MEDICAL ARTS BUILDING
312 APPLGARTH RD • SUITE 101
MONROE TOWNSHIP, NJ 08831
PHONE: 609-235-4100

Physician Publication

Winterize Your Body and Protect Yourself From Pain!

By Alan S. Nasar, M.D.

In my son's favorite movie, Disney Pixar Cars, the rusty old car says "*Winter is a grand ol' time. Of this there are no 'if's' or 'buts' - but remember - all that salt & grime can rust your bolts & freeze your —*)

This may be the age of global warming, but winter still means cold, snow, and ice. These three factors alone are responsible for an increased incidence of injuries reported from December to March. Slipping, falling, and throwing your back out while shoveling snow are very common complaints in my practice during the winter months. The good news is, with a little bit of preparation, many of these injuries are preventable.

Another problem encountered in the winter months is shorter days. This, combined with weather conditions, often translates into less time for outdoor fitness routines such as running, jogging, walking, hiking, and bicycling.

Here are some tips to help you stay active during the colder months and keep common winter injuries at bay:

Arthritis pain is usually worsened by cold weather so wearing gloves for hand arthritis and wearing a neoprene sleeve under your pants for knee arthritis will often improve flexibility and lessen pain. For knees, I often recommend viscosupplementation injections, which lubricate and nourish the arthritic knee for 6 months to a year.

Shoveling snow often leads to back injuries or worse. If you have heart disease or high blood pressure, check with your doctor before doing any high exertion activities. Proper body mechanics and positioning are important to avoid straining your back. New shovel designs help by allowing you to shovel with a more upright posture. Be sure to keep your back vertical. Bend with your knees and hips and lift with your leg muscles. Do not throw the snow any farther than necessary and do not twist your back. Motorized snow removal tools are a worthwhile investment, especially for larger areas, or for those prone to back injuries. Remember to salt your walkways and stairs to prevent icing.

Many people have exercise routines that get interrupted due to the cold winter months.

Others continue their workout no matter what. If you plan to exercise outdoors in freezing temperature you must dress appropriately. Wear layers to keep warm and pay special attention to your head, neck, hands and feet. Gloves, scarves, warm boots/shoes, and earmuffs or a wool hat are a must. Avoid shoes with high heels and plastic or leather soles. Rubber soles with good tread are best. Find a dry, well-lit area to walk. Use a cane or walker if necessary, and replace rubber tips if they are worn down. You may want to do your stretching and warm up indoors first, since it is harder to stretch when you are cold.

If you find winter has you less motivated to exercise, start an indoor aerobic routine to get your heart rate going. Try a treadmill or an elliptical trainer. Building core strength and increasing flexibility should be incorporated into your fitness program, as these activities decrease your risk of falling. Yoga, Pilates, Tai chi and exercises with rubber bands all help with balance and core stability.

If you can't play your favorite sport throughout the winter, add sport-specific exercises to your workout routine; these should focus on muscles that are not activated during the course of your usual day. If you're a golfer, locate an indoor driving range; if you're a softball player, go for the batting cages; if you play tennis, find an indoor court or try playing racquetball.

There are many ways you can have a safe winter season while keeping active.

Happy Wintering,

Sincerely, Alan S. Nasar, M.D.

