

Tips for Relieving Winter Pain

How to avoid the dangers of the cold season

In cities including Boston, Portland, and Chicago, snow has already hit the ground. Winter is a time for fun outdoor activities including skiing, sledding and skating; however, it's also a time for injuries, aches, and pains. With fluffy white snow can come broken bones, torn ligaments and more.

This cold season can pose dangers for people of all ages, making it important to take precautions in this weather. We all know the dangers of skiing and sledding, but some winter activities don't seem as dangerous as they are, such as getting dressed in the morning. Below, I've compiled some tips to stay safe during the winter.

Joint Pain

Use heating pads and moist hot packs to combat joint stiffness, especially for those suffering from arthritis. Many people feel like their joints tighten and become stiffer in the cold weather, even though no definitive studies have been able to prove why this occurs. Using heating pads, however, is a relatively cheap easy treatment for cold, achy joints. Microwavable flax seed packs are a great option for people with a need for something that emits moisture and can penetrate deep into skin tissue.

Some of my patients have found relief for joint pain by dipping their hands and feet into a paraffin wax bath, which helps warm up joints. To achieve the best results, I tell people to dip their hands and feet into the wax and allow it to dry for nine layers. The heat helps lubricate the joints. Feet tend to be easier to keep warm than hands though, so I also tell my patients to find a toasty pair of gloves to protect their joints. Further, gloves prevent the delicate skin on the hands from cracking, which becomes dry and painful.

Remaining active with cardio is also important for helping ease cold, achy joints. Any form of cardio exercise including running, walking, or swimming, can improve overall joint health, keeping them from feeling so stiff in the winter.



Heavy Winter Layers

Avoiding, or at least limiting, wearing heavy scarves is important to help maintain good posture during the winter. One thing many people don't realize is that heavy scarves and neckwear can affect posture greatly by weighing the neck down. Poor posture can lead to back, shoulder, and neck pain. Instead, when bundling up, you should opt for scarves made of lighter fabrics such as fleece.

This same tip goes for wearing heavy coats, especially with thick lapels in the front. All of the weight from the outerwear hangs directly on the shoulders, exacerbating forward head posture. Further, wool coats tend to restrict arm activity, so for anyone suffering from shoulder pain, this can be especially bad practice. Alternatively, layering stretchy sweaters or any type of puffy jackets can improve range of motion.

Shoes with Grip

Finding shoes to wear that are safe for winter weather, but also appropriate for work and school, can be hard. No matter what though, wearing shoes with rubber soles instead of slippery foam soles is crucial, especially for seniors and children. Foam soles usually have grooves in them for friction, but don't provide enough traction.

Exercising with Caution

Relating to the previous tip about shoes, runners tend to like the sneakers with foam soles because they feel less "clunky" to exercise in, but the rubber sole rule also applies to athletic shoes. Runners who like to practice outdoors should try to stick to asphalt and concrete surfaces, since they tend to be less slippery. Be careful with slippery fallen leaves and wet pavements. Foliage can cover things like manholes, so it's important for to exercise caution about where you step.

Further, wearing bright clothes or reflective gear while exercise outside is important for safety. The mornings and evenings of winter are darker than during other seasons, making it harder for both runners and drivers to see each other, which can lead to serious, even deadly, injuries. Additionally, running with both hands free is important for anyone who might need to catch themselves during a fall.

Winter is a dangerous time, so exercising caution while performing these daily tasks and choosing the right clothing to wear is crucial. Patients living in warmer areas can relax, but for those of us in the chillier states, it's important to be on high alert during the snowy, icy season. ■

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