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Why do People Die Shoveling Snow?

Snowmageddon, Snowpocalypse, the Polar Vortex, SnOMG!

There is no end to the terms for "really big snowstorm," and those terms came in handy, particularly during the 2014-'15 winter.

Just check out snowfall totals in the Top 10 Snowiest Cities

(<http://www.accuweather.com/en/weather-news/infographic-top-10-snowiest-ma/44059021>), according to Accuweather.com:

- Syracuse, NY – 117.1"
- Worcester, MA – 115.6"
- Buffalo, NY – 109.3"
- Boston, MA – 108.6"
- Erie, PA – 104"
- Rochester, NY – 96.3"
- South Bend, IN – 79.2"
- Grand Rapids, MI – 77.9"
- Providence, RI – 73.5"
- Manchester, NH – 69.7"



But with really big snow storms – and even everyday, run-of-the-mill snowfalls – comes a risk of death by shoveling. According to CBS News in Chicago, by early February 2015, around 18 people in the Chicago area had died in snow shoveling-related incidents (<http://chicago.cbslocal.com/2015/02/05/snow-shoveling-death-toll-hits-18-in-chicago-area/>). They ranged in age from their 40s to 75. Nationwide, snow shoveling is responsible for thousands of injuries and as many as 100 deaths each year.

So, why so many deaths? Shoveling snow is just another household chore, right?

Not at all, says Harvard Health Executive Editor Patrick J. Skerrett.

"Picking up a shovel and moving hundreds of pounds of snow, particularly after doing nothing physical for several months, can put a big strain on the heart (<http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/shoveling-snow-can-be-hard-on-the-heart-201302085868>)," Skerrett wrote in February 2013.

Pushing a heavy snow blower also can cause injury. And, there's the cold factor. Cold weather can increase heart rate and blood pressure. It can make blood clot more easily and constrict arteries, which decreases blood supply. This is true even in healthy people. Individuals over the age of 40 or who are relatively inactive should be particularly careful.

National Safety Council recommends the following tips to shovel safely.

- Do not shovel after eating or while smoking
- Take it slow and stretch out before you begin
- Shovel only fresh, powdery snow; it's lighter
- Push the snow rather than lifting it
- If you do lift it, use a small shovel or only partially fill the shovel
- Lift with your legs, not your back
- Do not work to the point of exhaustion

Don't pick up that shovel without a doctor's permission if you have a history of heart disease. If you feel tightness in the chest or dizziness, stop immediately. A clear driveway is not worth your life.

Snow Blower Safety

Be safe with these tips from the American Society for Surgery of the Hand and the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons:

- If the blower jams, turn it off
- Keep your hands away from the moving parts
- Do not drink alcohol and use the snow blower
- Be aware of the carbon monoxide risk of running a snow blower in an enclosed space
- Refuel your snow blower when it is off, never when it is running

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