

# Winter Wonderland?

## *Playing it Safe*

*by Vince Politte*



It happens every year. When the air turns frigid, local hospitals and medical clinics brace themselves for increased injuries resulting from frostbite, falls on the ice, vehicle accidents and the careless use of snow blowers. If you're spending time outdoors in the cold winter weather, remember these tips to help prevent injuries and unnecessary visits to the doctor's office or emergency room.

### **Shoveling Snow**

People of all ages tend to forget that shoveling snow is strenuous exercise. Depending on your normal level of activity, shoveling could injure muscles or tendons that you don't ordinarily use.

Older people should be especially cautious when going out to shovel snow. If you are over age 50 and have any type of heart condition, don't even consider picking up that shovel. If possible, borrow a neighbor's snow blower or let someone else do the work for you. If you are healthy and want to shovel for exercise, remember to stop to rest if you begin to feel fatigued.

Shoveling hazards are increased by the degree of cold, wind speed and the weight of the snow. If you must clear the snow yourself, take frequent breaks. Monitor your response to the exercise and if you begin to experience shortness of breath, chest, arm or shoulder pain, nausea or dizziness, you should go inside and call for help.

## Snow Blower Safety

Snow blowers are a great way to quickly clear snow from your driveway and sidewalks. They are definitely safer for most people than shoveling, but improper use of a snow blower has the potential to cause serious injury. Avoid dangerous situations and unnecessary accidents while using your equipment. Remember...

- Snow can clog a snow blower, causing it to temporarily malfunction.
- Even when the snow blower is turned off, the propeller blades may continue to be in motion and can result in severe injury.
- Never remove any safety devices from the snow blower.
- Fill gasoline-powered snow blowers outdoors—not in an enclosed area.
- If using an electric snow blower, be careful not to trip on or run over the cord.
- Never consume alcohol before using your snow blower.

## Preventing Frostbite

Exposure to cold temperatures for a prolonged period of time can result in frostbite, which causes the skin and surrounding tissue to freeze. Frostbite commonly occurs in the extremities—fingers, toes, ears and nose—which may lead to a loss of feeling and skin discoloration. In severe cases, frostbite can also cause permanent damage and/or loss of body parts. If you're going to be outside in the cold weather, you must protect yourself. Frostbite facts:

- Frostbite can occur even when the temperature is above 32 degrees Fahrenheit. Wind chill and moisture also contribute to frostbite conditions.
- Dress in layers, including warm, insulated gloves or mittens and boots that repel moisture. Always carry extra protective clothing in your car in case you become stranded or experience car trouble.
- Refrain from consuming alcohol when you're outside in cold weather.
- People who have diabetes and neuropathy or those taking certain medications are at higher risk for frostbite and should take extra precautions during frigid weather.

Recognize frostbite symptoms:

- Numbness, tingling, burning or itching
- Skin discoloration and swelling
- Hard or waxy skin
- Blisters or blackened skin

If you suspect frostbite, follow these guidelines and seek immediate medical attention:

- Go immediately to a warm place, preferably indoors.
- Carefully remove wet gloves and mittens.
- Refrain from rubbing or scratching the affected area and do not touch blisters resulting from frostbite.
- Carefully submerge affected areas in warm (not hot) water for 30 minutes or until medical care is available.
- Cover the area with a warm towel or blanket to thaw.
- If possible, wrap each frostbitten region loosely with sterile gauze.
- Thaw a frostbitten area only if it can be kept warm. Refreezing a frostbitten finger can result in permanent damage or loss.

## Icy Sidewalks and Parking Lots

Whether you're taking a crisp, winter stroll in your neighborhood or walking through the parking lot at work or at the grocery store, be alert for possible slippery conditions. Sidewalks and pavement can be more treacherous than they look, resulting in falls that could cause serious injury. Follow these tips for safe walking during and after ice or snow storms:

- Wear sensible boots with thick, non-slip tread soles and low heels. Keep these in your car in case you become stranded or experience car trouble.
- Thoroughly salt or sand driveways, walkways and sidewalks.
- Wait until snow/ice has melted before walking on salted surfaces.
- Watch where you step. Surfaces can re-freeze overnight, making sidewalks and parking lots slippery in the morning.
- Walk slowly and carefully, taking small steps.
- If you're in a situation where you cannot safely walk on the snow or ice, ask someone near you for assistance.
- When helping someone on the snow or ice, use extra caution.
- Never perform outdoor tasks requiring a ladder (i.e., hanging outdoor holiday lights) during snowy or icy conditions.

## Winter Driving

Winter driving presents many challenges. The Iowa Department of Transportation offers the following tips to help drivers stay safe:

- Do not overestimate your ability to drive when weather conditions are less than optimal. Be sure to check the



weather forecast before you leave home, and have a contingency plan if bad weather forces a change in itinerary.

- Slow down, wear your seat belt and never drink and drive.
- Keep extra distance between you and the car in front of you.
- Don't slam on the brakes. The wheels could lock, causing your car to skid. If your car begins to skid, turn the wheels in the direction in which it is sliding to straighten it out.
- Drive on interstates and one-way roads whenever possible.
- Turn on your lights to see and be seen.
- Clear snow and ice off the headlights, tail lights, mirrors and license plates and be sure to thoroughly clear all windows. Stop the car if necessary to keep windows clear; be sure to pull as far off the roadway as possible and engage your vehicle's warning flashers so that you don't become a target for passing vehicles.
- Use caution on bridges, ramps and overpasses, as they may freeze more quickly than the road surface.
- Check the windshield wipers to make sure they are not frozen to the windshield.
- If you become stuck in the snow, don't panic. Start by shoveling a path in front of and behind the wheels. Spreading sand or placing strips of carpet on the ground near the wheels can help provide the traction you need to get going again.

### Carbon Monoxide (CO) Poisoning

Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless and dangerous gas that has the potential to kill. It is produced when fossil fuel is not burned completely. Improperly ventilated rooms, failure to maintain appliances or careless use of fuel burners can lead to a potentially lethal buildup of carbon monoxide. CO poisoning is frequent during winter months when homeowners keep windows and doors tightly closed and furnaces are in use.

Mild carbon monoxide poisoning causes headache, nausea, vomiting, drowsiness and poor coordination. Most people who develop mild carbon monoxide poisoning recover quickly when moved into fresh air. Moderate or severe

carbon monoxide poisoning can cause confusion, loss of consciousness, chest pain, shortness of breath and coma. Thus, most victims are not able to move themselves and must be rescued. Severe carbon monoxide poisoning is often fatal.<sup>1</sup>

The following tips can help keep your home and business safe during the winter months:

- Install a UL-listed carbon monoxide alarm in your home that will sound when potentially dangerous levels of CO are present. A smoke detector does not warn you when CO is present. All homes should have **both** a CO alarm and a smoke detector. CO alarms and smoke detectors can be purchased at discount stores, hardware stores and building supply stores.
- Have a qualified technician inspect your furnace and check all fuel-burning appliances in the fall. Make sure that your heating system and all fuel-burning appliances, including fireplaces, wood stoves or space heaters, have an adequate air supply and are correctly vented and properly maintained.
- Portable propane camping equipment and gas barbecues are approved for outdoor use only. They should never be used inside homes, cabins, tents, recreational vehicles or boats. Read the labels on recreational appliances and follow the manufacturer's operating instructions.
- If your car is stuck in the snow, make sure that the exhaust (tail pipe) is free of snow before you start the engine. If you must run the engine to stay warm, check the exhaust pipe periodically to make certain it remains clear. It's also a good idea to open a window slightly, to be sure that your vehicle is ventilated while the engine is running.
- During power outages, be particularly careful not to heat living areas by burning charcoal or using gasoline engines, gas stoves or gas ovens in enclosed spaces. This also applies to garages; even if the door is open, CO gas can build to lethal levels. In the case of an attached garage, the potential exists for CO to seep into the house and harm occupants.

Remaining safe during the winter months isn't hard if you plan ahead and use common sense. Following these tips can help keep winter a wonderland instead of a minefield.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.carbonmonoxidekills.com/symptom.htm>