

Protect Your Hands this Winter

It can be relaxing and peaceful to enjoy the snow if you are able to look at it from inside the warmth of your own home. But in most cases, we need to venture out at some point – and winter weather can be especially frigid in the Midwest.

Going out into wintery weather means cold hands and clearing paths to be able to walk and drive safely. However, too much time spent outside when it's cold or not taking proper safety measures when outside can result in serious, even life-threatening, illness or injury to your hands and upper extremities, which is why it is important to remain cautious when venturing outside in the winter months.

Dr. Mary Elizabeth Rashid, an OSF HealthCare hand and upper extremity surgeon, says the injuries she most frequently sees during this time of year occur that result in what are known as [FOOSH](#) (fall onto an outstretched hand) injuries.

Mary Elizabeth Rashid, MD, Hand and Upper Extremity Surgeon, OSF HealthCare

“The most common are probably falls related to ice – especially from accumulation of ice on decks and porches that may be exposed to the cold more often. Even just a fall from standing height generally can result in hip fractures, and wrist and hand fractures are pretty common.” (:20)

In order to avoid a fall this winter, it is important to wear shoes with proper gripping, apply salt to walking paths prior to a snowfall, and to pay close attention to potential black ice. Also, says Dr. Rashid, be sure not to delay seeking medical attention if necessary.

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“After a fall, if there's any significant swelling, bruising, severe tenderness, or numbness or tingling in the hand or the wrist – you should seek medical attention to at least get an x-ray. If it is a fall where you stand up and can't weight bear on your lower extremity, you absolutely should seek medical attention for that.” (:18)

In addition to falls, another hand-related injury that Dr. Rashid sees during the winter months occurs from snow blowers. In fact, the Consumer Products Safety Commission estimates that 3,000 people are treated in emergency rooms in the United States for snow blower injuries each year. These types of injuries typically occur when someone reaches in to clear snow out of the machine without ensuring it is completely off first.

Types of injuries that can occur from a snow blower can range from cuts to the hand and arm to completely losing fingers. Dr. Rashid advises to use extra caution when using a snow blower.

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“If the snow blower does get clogged, make sure that you first turn it off before you disimpact the snow. Disengage the clutch and then wait a good five to ten seconds for the blades to stop rotating. And never ever use your hands to disimpact the snow blower.” (:18)

Another result of extremely cold conditions that can cause damage to your hands is frostbite. Signs and symptoms of frostbite include white or grayish-yellow skin area, skin that feels firm or waxy, and numbness. So, at what point should you seek medical care?

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“Anytime you have blanching or whiteness of the fingertips, you should go inside immediately. If it's been prolonged, any numbness or tingling in the fingers. The first sign of frostbite to the fingers is any blistering – and definitely I would recommend seeking medical attention for that.” (:15)

Additionally, while hypothermia most often occurs at very cold temperatures, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) does warn that hypothermia can occur even at cool temperatures above 40°F. Signs and symptoms of hypothermia include shivering, confusion, memory loss, slurred speech, fumbling hands, and drowsiness.

The best ways to avoid hand injuries this winter include being prepared for snow before it falls, having salt, shovels, and other snow-clearing tools on hand, and wearing proper attire when venturing outside, such as gloves, hat, coat, and boots.

If you do experience a major winter injury and are unable to treat it at home, call 911 or go to the closest urgent care to seek immediate medical attention.