

Get a Grip: Avoid Hand Injuries 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. 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 and injury to your hands and upper extremities.

"We have three main categories of injuries that we worry about in the hand and upper extremity. Number one is the appearance of snow blower injuries when we have large accumulations of snow, number two is the appearance of slip and fall injuries causing fractures in the hand when we have ice or snow on the ground, and the third one comes with extreme cold in the form of frostbite injuries," says Ramsey Ellis, M.D., fellowship-trained hand surgeon, OSF HealthCare.

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.

"It's so important when using a snow blower to never reach your hand into the auger, or the spinning mechanism that helps disrupt and throw the snow – because even if you have your snow blower turned off, there are instances in which there is stored energy and the auger can still spin. So if you reach in and dislodge the obstruction and that residual energy fires off, you can sustain a severe hand injury that results in amputated fingers, lacerated fingers, and severe fractures," cautions Dr. Ellis.

While outside snow blowing your driveway or clearing a path to your car or front porch, another thing to be cautious of is slipping and falling on ice. Dr. Ellis sees "slip and fall" hand and wrist injuries quite often during the winter.

"One of the most common injuries we see in the winter is a slip and a fall onto outstretched hands/wrists, or what we call a FOOSH. People fall onto their wrists and hands and they sustain radius fractures that require operative intervention. So one of the really important safety measures to try to avoid those types of injuries in the winter is to wear really good footwear that has appropriate tread and to, on your own property, shovel and salt or sand in order to avoid the buildup of slippery surfaces on your sidewalk, your front walk, and on your path to your vehicle," explains Dr. Ellis

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. Dr. Ellis warns that the effects of frostbite can range from minor to very severe.

"At the minimum it can cause just redness, soreness, and swelling and at the maximum it can cause loss of digits and loss of hands from necrosis. That is extremely unusual since most people realize before that stage, but you can get small fingertip ulcerations quite easily and that's something we do see."

Additionally, while hypothermia most often occurs at very cold temperatures, the CDC warns that it 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 way to avoid both hypothermia and frostbite is to take preventative measures to protect yourself when outdoors during the winter months.

"The key things are to limit the duration of exposure and to make sure to have excellent protective gear if you're going to be doing prolonged work in cold environments. So having a really good set of mittens and gloves and wearing silk liners and taking frequent breaks," Dr. Ellis advises.

If you experience any of the three major winter hand injuries and you are unable to treat it at home, call 911 or go to the closest urgent care center to seek professional medical attention.