

Painfree Yardwork?

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It's that time of year again. Spring has sprung and we've all been hard at work getting our yards and gardens back into shape. Unfortunately, there are usually a lot of aches and pains associated with these activities. Basic muscle soreness often accompanies heavy yard work and gardening. However, using proper body mechanics/lifting techniques and proper stretching before and after can greatly reduce the risk of back and neck injuries and repetitive overuse trauma to the joints in our upper and lower extremities.

It is always a good idea to stretch out before any type of exercise including yard work. Some quick and easy stretches to perform prior to going outside and working are: backbends (place your hands in the small of your back and gently bend backwards keeping your knees straight), side bends (stretching arms overhead), deep squats (with feet shoulder width apart), hamstring and calf stretches, neck range of motion all directions, and shoulder rolls forward and backward. Hold hamstring/calf stretches 2 x 30 seconds each leg. All other exercises should be done 10 x 5 seconds. Some of these stretches may be contraindicated for individuals with certain pre-existing musculoskeletal conditions. Consult your physician or physical therapist if you have any questions about activities and exercises you should avoid.

Protect your back when working outside. Always keep your back as straight as possible and bend at the hips and knees with your feet spread wide apart when lifting (especially with shoveling and heavy lifting). Keep your head more upright rather than flexing your neck forward to look down when lifting. This will help keep your back from bending forward too much. No back, including a "strong" one, is designed to tolerate these types of activities. Your larger thigh and buttock muscles were designed for lifting, not the long, thin erector spinae muscles that run up and down the length of your back. Also, avoid twisting at the waist when working with heavy loads and performing repetitive tasks.

Another important thing to remember is to take regular breaks when planning on doing a lot of yard work, especially when performing repetitive tasks that may put a lot of strain on your joints (e.g. shoveling, weeding, digging/planting, kneeling). Put down a towel or pad when kneeling. Work on your hands and knees and/or sit down rather than standing and bending at the waist or squatting and sitting on the backs of your heels. These last two positions put a lot of strain on the back, knees, and ankles. Tendonitis can flare up rapidly in the extremity joints and may take a long time to go away if you do not give your body ample time to recover or continue to perform these aggravating activities.

Prevention is always the best medicine. Most injuries can be avoided by doing a little stretching, warming up your joints first, taking breaks regularly to let your body recover, and using proper body mechanics. However, if you do notice pain in a specific area that does not go away within a 5-7 days, try to avoid the activities that brought on your symptoms. Apply ice to the affected joint(s) 2-3x/day for 10-15 minutes. If your pain feels more muscle than joint related you may try moist heat 15-20 minutes 2-3x/day. Tylenol/Ibuprofen may help with pain and swelling. If your symptoms persist after two weeks or start to worsen you should contact your physician. If you are unable to prevent injury, it is best to seek medical attention as soon as possible before you develop a chronic problem. Your physical therapist can help speed up your recovery and show you how to prevent future re-injury.