



How to Get Your Family to Exercise Safely This Winter

Take a few easy steps to prevent weather-related injuries.

By: [Karen Springen](#)

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Source: Getty Images

Ski together. But do it safely.

Doctors want you to get your family outside, exercising together in the winter. After all, two-thirds of Americans are overweight. But what can you do to decrease the risk of injuries and other cold-weather problems?

A lot. The American College of Sports Medicine, for example, recommends using double-sided tape to attach a piece of a metal scouring pad or metal netting to the bottom of your shoes to get more traction on ice and snow. Who knew?

To get more tips about safe winter physical activity, I talked with Brian Sokalsky, an osteopathic doctor in the field of medicine at The Rothman Institute in Egg Harbor Township, N.J. Excerpts:

Cold weather can make asthma temporarily worse. Why, and what should people do about it?

Cold air dries out the airway, which results in increased inflammation in the airway, and then you get the asthma attack. The best way to prevent an attack of their asthma is to use their inhaler about 15 to 30 minutes before starting exercise.

A facemask helps, too, right? Should people without asthma also use one, too?

Anybody can use a facemask. It warms the air as they breathe it in. It's more comfortable. If I'm not used to running outside, I'll get some burning in my lungs.

When people ski at altitudes above 7,000 feet when they're not used to them, they can feel sick. Drinking lots of water and avoiding cigarettes and alcohol are common recommendations. Why are they so important?

You get decreased amount of oxygen to the lungs with the smoking. The drinking is dehydrating.

How much water should you drink?

I usually tell my patients anywhere from eight to 12 eight-ounce glasses of water or some type of non-caffeinated beverage. Caffeine is a diuretic. It makes you urinate. You counteract the fluids you're taking in.

Anything special for different ages – say, kids vs. grandparents?

If kids start complaining of a headache, have them rest, take a nap, only ski a half day. Give them time to get acclimated. It's just getting the oxygen levels up in the blood.

Everyone hears about wearing layers of clothes. What should each layer be made of, in order from the skin to the outer surface?

[Start with] an Under Armour-type shirt that pulls the moisture off of the body, that wicks it off. The moisture sucks the heat out of the body. The body then has to heat the moisture up to body temperature. If you wick it off, the body doesn't need to heat it up.

No cotton shirts?

Not underneath. On top is OK. Anything in the middle layers, the warmer the better.

So the first layer is the thinnest?

The first layer is thin and tight. And then thicker. The outer layer you want windproof and water proof.

Otherwise, what could happen?

Improperly layered, you can get hypothermia, and then exposed skin, the face or the hands, can get frostbite.

How can parents know kids are in danger of frostbite and other problems?

The exposed skin would be very painful. The skin will start turning almost blue because it isn't getting oxygen. With hypothermia, they'll usually start getting real tired, and they'll almost look sleepy.

Then the kids could fall down on slope?

Yes. As a whole, if the body isn't maintaining its temperature, then the internal structures start not functioning properly.

What about safe snow shoveling?

Just like any other exercise or athletic activity, you want a proper warm up. Even going for a walk around the block for five or 10 minutes loosens up the muscles and gets the blood flowing.

Why can snow shoveling cause heart attacks?

It's basically the heart attack occurs because the heart gets overstressed from the exertion, so the heart starts beating faster and harder, the pressure goes up, the heart muscle stops getting oxygen, and you have the heart attack. Limiting the exertion helps — smaller shovelfuls so you're not exerting as much.

What if older guys want to shovel?

Go out and help him or do it for him! If he has a diagnosed heart condition, you really want to watch him. But a lot of times people don't have anything diagnosed. They just start getting chest pains.

How can parents teach their kids to be defensive skiers, who watch out for trees and out-of-control types?

Get them lessons early on. A lot of parents want to teach their kids. No matter what you say, you can say the same exact thing as the instructor, but they're not listening to you. They'll learn from someone they'll pay more attention to. Make sure they're sticking to trails they're comfortable skiing. If they're only comfortable doing blue squares, don't go onto black diamonds. If they don't have experience with moguls, stay off trails with moguls.

What's the best way to prevent injury?

The most important thing is that core strength.

But what if your family members haven't been doing Pilates, sit-ups, and other core-strengthening exercises?

Be careful. And do it for next year! A lot of injuries are just bad luck. You can't control the skier coming down and cutting you off. You can't control that ice patch you can't see. Control what you can, and try to have fun. Do your thing, do what you've been taught to do, and you can't worry about injury.

You want people out there, exercising and not getting too worked up about the potential for disaster?!

Absolutely. Just accept that injury is a part of the risk of your activity. Enjoy yourself!