

## SAFE GARDENING TIPS TO PREVENT INJURY

By Dr. John A. Papa, DC, FCCP(C)

Spring is upon us and so is the arrival of the gardening season. Raking, lifting, digging, and planting can be strenuous activities. Below are some simple tips that can help you avoid and prevent injury during the gardening season.

**1. Prepare your body for physical activity with a warm-up.** Climbing stairs, marching on the spot, or going for a quick walk around the block are examples of excellent warm-up activities that can be completed in as little as five to ten minutes. Follow this with some gentle stretch exercises such as knee to chest, shoulder, forearm and wrist stretches. Your muscles and joints will appreciate this prior to being asked to do work.

**2. Use the right tools for the tasks to be performed.** Always make sure that tools are a comfortable weight and size for you. There are many ergonomically designed tools which are lightweight, with long padded handles and spring action mechanisms that can reduce strain and effort. Carts and wheelbarrows minimize the need for lifting and carrying, reducing your risk of physical injury.



**3. Proper lifting means bend the knees, keep the back straight and brace!** Use your leg and arm muscles to do the lifting while keeping your back straight. Maintaining the natural and neutral curves of your back is important, as this is its strongest and most secure position. Contracting and bracing your abdominal muscles during lifting improves spinal stability and decreases the chance of injury. Avoid twisting and turning by positioning yourself accordingly. Be sure to lift slowly and smoothly with the load close to your body and do not jerk with your lifts.

**4. Alternate activities and change positions.** Once you begin, take turns alternating between heavy chores such as digging, and lighter less physically demanding tasks such as planting, every 10 to 15 minutes. Avoid prolonged working postures. Changing hands frequently when you rake, hoe or dig prevents muscle strain and joint stress on one side of the body.

**5. Drink plenty of water before, during and after gardening activity.** Dehydration affects your energy level and physical functioning. Staying hydrated decreases the risks of cramps and strains, and helps to protect joints by providing lubrication and cushioning.



**6. Preparing for the elements and pacing.** Select comfortable, thick-soled, protective shoes that support your arches to reduce joint pain and aching muscles. To protect from sun exposure, apply sunscreen, and wear a wide-brim hat. Wear loose and comfortable clothing. Work at a safe pace and know your physical limits. Stop gardening immediately if you feel chest pain or persistent muscle or joint pain.

In the event that you suffer a muscle or joint injury while gardening that does not subside, you should contact a licensed health professional who deals in the diagnosis and treatment of these injuries. For more information, visit [www.nhwc.ca](http://www.nhwc.ca).

*This article is a basic summary for educational purposes only. It is not intended, and should not be considered, as a replacement for consultation, diagnosis or treatment by a duly licensed health practitioner.*