

## Safety Tips for Winter Walking

When the winter air is crisp and the ground is covered with snow, there's nothing like taking a walk to enjoy the beauty of the season — and walking is one of the best ways to keep fit.

On the other hand, winter can be a challenging time of year to get out and about. Freezing rain, icy surfaces and piles of hard-packed snow pose a hazard for the innocent pedestrian.

A few simple measures can make it safer to walk outdoors in the winter. Removing snow and ice, putting sand or salt on areas where people walk, and wearing the right footwear all make a big difference.

According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), almost 12,000 Ontarians visited an emergency room (ER) in 2002–2003 after falling on ice. Over half of the incidents took place in January and February.

Baby boomers are the most prone to falling on ice. The 40 to 59 demographic accounted for 30 percent of the ER visits. Those who were hospitalized stayed an average of 3.6 days.

However, older age groups were more likely to be admitted to hospital, with injuries serious enough to require longer stays. Over one-third of all people hospitalized after falling on ice were 60 to 79 years of age; on average they were hospitalized for 7.6 days. The elderly stay in hospital the longest after a fall on ice. The average stay for those aged 80 and older was 14.5 days.

Just one bad fall on ice can have long-term consequences. These include: chronic pain in the affected area; a disabling injury that may mean loss of independence; or fear of another fall, which discourages a healthy, active lifestyle.

### Basic Precautions

The Canada Safety Council offers seniors some practical suggestions to stay active in winter.

*As winter approaches, outfit yourself for safe walking:*

Choose a good pair of winter boots. For warmth and stability look for these features:

- well insulated and waterproof;
- thick, non-slip tread sole;
- wide, low heels; and
- light in weight.

Ice grippers on footwear can help you walk on hard packed snow and ice. But be careful! Grippers become dangerously slippery and must be removed before walking on smooth surfaces such as stone, tile and ceramic. Before buying the grippers, be sure that you are able to attach and remove them from your boots, this is best done sitting down.

Use a cane to help with balance. Have it fitted to the right height for you. When your cane is held upside down, the end should be at wrist level. Speak to your doctor, pharmacist or local public health department about how to use your cane properly.

Attach an ice pick at the end of your cane. Cane picks will be slippery on hard surfaces so be sure to flip it back as you get indoors. Picks are available at most drug stores.

If you need further support use a walker. The cost can be covered by government programs;

talk with your doctor.

Wear a hip protector (a lightweight belt or pant with shields to guard the hips). It can help protect the hips against fractures and give added confidence.

Help other road users see you by wearing bright colors or adding reflective material to clothing.

Prevent heat loss by wearing a warm hat, scarf, and mittens or gloves. Dressing in layers may also keep you warmer.

*Once the snow and ice arrive, make sure your walking surfaces are safe:*

Keep entranceways and sidewalks clear of ice and snow. Report hazards on sidewalks or pathways to your landlord or the City.

Contact your local home support agency or other community services for help with snow removal, transportation and grocery bus services.

Carry a small bag of grit, sand or non clumping cat litter in your jacket pocket or handbag, to sprinkle when you are confronted with icy sidewalks, steps, bus stops, etc.

Ask a passer-by to help you cross the icy surface.

### **Walking on Ice**

Facing an icy surface can be a paralyzing experience. Not everyone has grippers and other safety aids. So, what should you do if it's impossible to avoid an icy patch? Believe it or not, body movements can increase your stability on an icy surface.

First, slow down and think about your next move. Keeping your body as loose as possible, spread your feet to more than a foot apart to provide a base of support. This will help stabilize you as you walk.

Next, keep your knees loose and don't let them lock. If you can, let them bend a bit. This will keep your centre of gravity lower to the ground, which further stabilizes the body.

Now you are ready to take a step. Make the step small, placing your whole foot down at once. Then shift your weight very slowly to this foot and bring your other foot to meet it the same way. Keep a wide base of support.

Some people prefer to drag their feet or shuffle them. If this feels better to you, then do so. Just remember to place your whole foot on the ice at once and keep your base of support approximately one foot wide.

Of course, it's always better to avoid tricky situations by being prepared and planning a safe route for your walk.

Sources: [Ottawa Public Health](#), [Niagara Region Public Health](#)