

Winter Warm-Up Tips

By Nancy Belli, Fitness Director

Why bother warming up?

Warming up prior to activity, especially in the winter, is very beneficial. Not only does it enhance performance by improving speed and coordination of muscle contractions while decreasing bone and joint friction, but it also decreases your risk of a heart attack. Research has shown that more heart attacks occur during the winter due to cold temperatures causing arteries to constrict, thereby reducing blood flow (and oxygen supply) to the heart. The heart also has to work harder in winter in order to maintain body heat. Activity can compound the demand of the heart if the body is not a “well-oiled” machine. Suzanne Nottingham, a spokesperson for the American Council on Exercise, compares making cold muscles work to “driving a car with the brakes on.” A good warm up can increase body temperature, lubricate joints, mobilize oxidative energy sources, enhance reaction and response time all while preventing early fatigue.

How long does it take, and what should I do?

Ten minutes is really all most people need for an adequate warm up. Think of it as limbering movements and rehearsing skills prior to actually going all out for an activity – including building a snowman. Begin with **simple isolated movements** like arm and/or ankle circles, shoulder shrugs, and leg swings to start the process. Add to that some **rotational movements** like pelvic rotations, some trunk twists, and crossing arm and leg movements. This will take your muscles through all the planes of movement. Next, we want to add some **compound movements** like squat and lift, and side overhead reaches to increase the range of motion. Additional movements such as exaggerated hops and skips will gradually increase the body temperature. Finally, **rehearse some skills** that you will use during your activity to enhance muscle coordination and timing. Some people may **lightly stretch after they perform a warm-up** to enhance the elasticity of the muscle and increase the range of motion surrounding the joints.

How do I know that I’m ready?

You will feel your body temperature increasing and your muscle movements becoming easier to perform. There will also be some light perspiration, and you may notice that your heart rate has increased slightly. This type of gradual mobilization signals your neural, circulatory, respiratory, vestibular, and muscular systems that more intensive activity is going to occur, similarly the way a conductor cues the orchestra that the concert is about to begin.

What else?

Here are some practical tips from the American Heart Association:

1. Take frequent rest breaks from activity especially strenuous ones like shoveling
2. Don’t eat a heavy meal right before or after strenuous activities – this can put an added load on your heart.
3. Don’t drink alcoholic beverages – alcohol may falsely increase a feeling of warmth and thereby causing you to underestimate the actual strain of the cold weather on your body.
4. Dress in layers of warm clothing to provide insulation from the cold – remember to wear a hat since a large portion of heat is lost through your head.

Just because it’s cold outside doesn’t mean that you can’t be active. Get out there and enjoy the snow!