



## **Back Safety: Avoiding Pain in Your Own Backyard**

By Dr. Jay Lipoff

When the mercury rises, many of us are possessed with the urge to get outdoors and prepare the garden beds, do yard cleanup, and maybe plant a new tree or shrub. For others, a relative or friend in need may be what prompts you to grab a rake. You may even try to do all of this in one weekend! Come Sunday night, you're apt to be bent over with back pain and a stiff neck. Whether you're tending your own garden or that of an older loved one, it doesn't have to be that way if you're smart.

### **BACK SAFETY: BEFORE YOU START**

Here are some techniques that can save your spine while performing these four common backyard chores.

#### **Raking and Hoeing**

Raking is a one-sided chore because you tend to turn to one side and predominantly use one arm. Try to engage both sides of your body when performing the motion. Hoeing also puts more strain on one arm and hand.

With both raking and hoeing, switch sides every few minutes, even though it will feel awkward. If you're working a large area, give yourself a break every 20 minutes with a rest and a glass of lemonade or switch to a different type of activity. Always walk to where you need to be--don't reach with the hoe or rake, which will cause more stress to the muscles of your lower back and could lead to a whole bunch of other problems.

#### **Digging and Shoveling**

Whether you're digging a hole or shoveling compost into your wheelbarrow, the key to avoiding back injury is to take it slowly and don't overload the shovel. Wear heavy-duty boots so you can step down hard onto the shovel, letting your body weight do much of the work. Bend your knees when lifting the shovel so those big muscles in your legs and buttocks are doing the heavy lifting, and you're not bent over, straining your back. If you have to shovel something heavy, such as gravel, use your thigh as a fulcrum (think of the shovel as a seesaw) by placing the handle of the shovel onto it about three quarters of the way down. Now all you have to do is push down on the handle to lift up that heavy gravel.

## Mowing

If you can't afford a lawn service and don't have kids who can do this chore for you, the next best thing is a riding mower. Make sure it has a comfortable seat because all that bouncing on a bad seat wrecks your back. If you can't get your seat replaced, try sitting on a boat cushion. If you mow slowly, it will diminish any unevenness in the terrain (and will do a better job on the lawn to boot). If you prefer a push mower, try to get one that is self-propelled, which reduces strain going up hills and around curves. With any push mower, self-propelled or not, pushing is better for your back than pulling; try to limit back-and-forth yanking. Stay close to the mower to avoid overreaching.

## Trimming and Weed Whacking

A trimmer or weed whacker is a terribly designed machine. It requires us to hold it in front of our body while leaning forward. The weight in front of you is multiplied by 10-15 times the actual weight of the trimmer. In addition, just leaning forward creates 200 pounds of additional pressure per square inch on the discs of your spine. If your trimmer comes with a shoulder strap to minimize back strain, use it. Otherwise, I recommend strategic stone walls, flower gardens, a neighborhood kid and mulching to reduce the need for trimmers at all. If you use one, be careful so you're not sore the next day.

One final piece of advice: Before launching into any big outdoor project, whether it's stacking firewood or moving patio furniture out of the garage, take a few minutes to loosen up. Do some stretches to warm up your muscles. If you take care of your back when doing outdoor chores, your back will take care of you.

## BACK SOOTHERS: THE MORNING AFTER

If, despite all the precautions, you're hurting after a weekend (or even just a few hours) of yardwork, it's not necessary to run straight to the chiropractor, doctor, acupuncturist or massage therapist. Try these home-care treatments first:

Ice it. As a general rule, ice is for inflammation and heat is for muscle spasms. Ice is typically used during the first 24-48 hours of an injury. It helps reduce the swelling and numb the area of pain. When applying ice, you will feel the coldness followed by a burning sensation, then an achy feeling followed by numbness. If you don't have a medical ice pack (which doesn't freeze completely), you can use a package of frozen peas, or even make your own ice pack by putting a 1:2 ratio of rubbing alcohol to water in a Ziploc bag. Don't use a solid blue ice pack that goes in your cooler—it's too cold if applied to the skin. Apply ice for 20 minutes every 2 hours.

Then heat it. After the initial 48 hours, you want to use heat to bring in fluids and nutrients to help facilitate the healing process. Heat helps ease muscle tension and reduce joint stiffness as well. Moist heat (see a moist heating pad) is better than dry heat because it penetrates the area deeper. Only if your heating pad has a sponge should you use something wet with it. If you are still at a loss for heat, try a hot water bottle, a bath or a shower. You can also put a moist towel in the microwave, and then wrap it in another towel so it doesn't burn you. Apply heat for 20 minutes every 2 hours.

Rest it, but don't ignore it. Rest and sleep will help you heal faster from muscle aches and pains caused by the minor injuries of yardwork. However, it's also good to bring blood into the area. So while you want to avoid reinjuring the traumatized muscle through lifting or heavy exercise, you should still do slow stretches that deliver blood to the surrounding tissues. Too much lying around can actually make an injury worse. Just like a sprained ankle, we no longer immobilize it but get it moving as much as we can to bring nutrients in and maintain motion.