

This season, don't shop 'till you drop

Shop smart, or your back might smart. But there are ways to avoid holiday shopping strain. 'Tis the season of adorning homes with lights and ornaments, decorating Christmas trees and most importantly spending time with friends and loved ones. It is also the time of year that we see an increase in traffic at the malls as people search for gifts.

For the most part, many of these folks are not accustomed to long hours of walking malls, battling other zealous shoppers, engaging in tug-of-wars with unruly carts and braving long checkout lines. Often, they find that when they finally arrive back home they feel worn out, sore and promising themselves that they will not do that again next year (same promise as the year before).

With a few tips and a little common sense we can reduce the cumulative effects of the shopping safaris and avoid shopping until you drop. Choose your battles well. Pick a shopping cart that will push and pull well. If the cart gets difficult to maneuver remember that we can pull more than we push and it is often safer. Wear comfortable and supportive footwear. Perhaps even go as far as taking a pair of walking shoes with you and once in the mall or store take a moment to change from your winter boots into a shoe, there are often benches just inside the entrances to make this process easier. Often winter boots are heavy and may not provide the best support for your feet. Applying this strategy will keep the feet happy while taking undue strain off the leg musculature and stress off the spine.

Keeping with the footwear theme, remember that well-traveled parking lots tend to become snow packed and often icy. This, in turn, increases your risk of slipping and falling. One strategy that has gained popularity in attempting to avoid icy falls is temporarily fixing anti-slip devices to the bottom of your boots. There are a number of products available in the community. One product that has been endorsed by the Canadian physiotherapy association is a product known as YakTrax and is available around town (samples can be seen our clinics). Certainly other products work well as well. One caution is to make sure to remove them immediately once inside as the metal cleats or springs can become slippery on tile or cement.

Take care when loading and unloading your shopping cart(s). Some stores have deep carts, anticipating that we can put more in them. Danger lies in that, however if we have a heavy item to place in the cart we tend to lean over the cart and bend our spines (lower backs); this places a huge stress on the back, which can lead to injury. So, perhaps have a store person take your heavy item directly to the till or front of the store for you. Or, place the item on top of the cart rather than deep into the basket. Use proper lifting techniques by allowing the legs to do the lifting, not your back.

Take frequent breaks if needed again benches are strategically placed in malls and stores. This also provides an opportune time to take your water bottle out and stay hydrated as often we are dressed for winter – which works well for outside yet inside we can heat up and this can lead to dehydration. So dress in layers and keep hydrated. Once you have successfully cleared the congested checkout lines, most folks think they are home free. However we cannot let our guards down quite yet, as loading and unloading the treasures in and out of our vehicle can also pose a risk. Take time to place heavy items as close to waist height as possible (perhaps on the front seat or back seat, preferably next to a door for ease of access) and avoid placing them into deep trunk wells. Take time when placing bags into back seats not to reach from the front seat to the back seat; this twisting action is dangerous to the thoracic spine (mid back) and also places large stresses on the shoulder joints.

Hopefully, the above thoughts will make your shopping experience a little more enjoyable.

Stay well through the holidays.

Doug Treloar, Yellowhead Physiotherapy