Snow Blower Safety Talk



WHAT'S AT STAKE?

If you use a snow blower, it is important to recognize that this machine doesn't make snow removal either effortless or risk-free. While not as strenuous as manual shoveling, using a snow blower remains a physical labour that is done outdoors in the snow and cold. Snow blowers have various degrees of effectiveness depending on their design and price. Snow blowers also cannot remove the build-up of ice under the snow.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

GENERAL

When the snow flies, nothing beats a snow blower for clearing walks and driveways. But snow blowers are inherently dangerous machines, not only to the operator but to people nearby—some models can throw snow, along with rocks or anything else hidden in the snow, a distance of up to 30 feet. And if you have children in your neighborhood, you need to be extra vigilant because they may not be aware they need to stay away from the snow blower while they run around.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of people suffer serious damage to their fingers or hands due to the improper handling of snow blowers. Most commonly, the tips of the fingers need to be amputated, so preventing the injury initially is key.

Injuries usually occur when the snow is heavy, wet, or has accumulated several inches. The snow clogs the exit chute of the machine, and the person using the machine tries to unclog this using his/her hand. Unfortunately, the blades still can rotate when the machine is off, and these cut whatever is in their path.

Snow blowers (also known as snow throwers) were involved in an estimated 7,000 injuries in 2011, according to data reported to the Consumer Product Safety Commission from hospital emergency rooms. Compared with other household products, snow blowers have a relatively high rate of hospitalization and severe injury, according to our safety experts. A great many injuries occur when consumers try to clear the discharge chute with their hands—causing, in some cases, severe fractures and even amputation.

SNOW BLOWER OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES

Hot Muffler

Two-stage snow blower models have exposed mufflers that are a burn hazard—even those with “metal muffler guards,” which only help prevent a serious burn. (A single-stage model’s engine is almost always tucked away, unexposed, underneath the machine.) Even if you keep your kids inside while you clear snow, warn children about this danger, and when you’re done clearing snow, always return the snow blower to a locked garage, shed, or storage space to keep children safe.

Machines / Fuel / Children

Once your snow blower is turned off, cooled down, and ready to put away, store it in a locked shed or cabinet in your garage or basement to keep kids away from it, and make that area off-limits. A number of child injuries have occurred when children have come near a snow blower that was not in operation, and gotten hurt. CPSC reports describe a 12-year-old boy who was filling a snow blower tire with air that exploded in his face, causing a concussion and an eye injury, and a 9-year-old boy who lacerated an eye when a spring came flying out of a snow blower he was helping to fix. A 7-year-old girl walking into the garage at her home fell and hit her head on a snow blower, resulting in a laceration and loss of consciousness. Never let a child repair, walk near, or operate a snow blower. Also lock up extra fuel for any gas-powered equipment, and make sure children never have access to it.

Reminders When Using Snow Blowers

It is important to make sure that powered equipment, such as snow blowers are properly grounded to protect workers from electric shocks or electrocutions. When performing maintenance or cleaning, make sure the equipment is properly guarded and is disconnected from power sources.

Snow blowers commonly cause lacerations or amputations when operators attempt to clear jams with the equipment turned on. Never attempt to clear a jam by hand. First, turn the snow blower off and wait for all moving parts to stop, and then use a long stick to clear wet snow or debris from the machine. Keep your hands and feet away from moving parts. Refuel a snow blower prior to starting the machine; do not add fuel when the equipment is running or when the engine is hot.

SPECIFIC DANGERS

Projective Discharge

Snow blowers scoop up whatever is on the ground, including rocks and sticks, and shoot them out at dangerous speeds—powerful enough for a rock to break a glass window, in some cases. A child (or pet, or neighbor) who unwittingly crosses into the stream of snow can get hurt by these fast moving objects, including damaging an eye. Be mindful of where the chute is aimed at all times, and be sure no one is in the path of the snow stream. Again, the best bet is to keep kids and pets indoors.

THE AUGER AND CLOTHING

The auger can pull in clothing. The area that pulls in massive amounts of snow is powerful because it has to be—so much so that it can draw in anything in its path, including a loose scarf, jacket, pants, long hair, shoelaces, or drawstrings, for example. A child who runs or falls near a snow blower in operation runs a risk of getting hurt or killed. CPSC data show that within a two-month period from December 2007 to January 2008, two 8-year-old girls suffered the same tragic fate when their jacket hoods got caught in a snow blower. According to a CPSC report, one girl playing outside fell backwards into the path of a snow blower her mother was operating. The hood of her jacket became entangled in the auger of the snow thrower

and constricted around her neck, resulting in death. The other girl’s clothing also becoming entangled in the auger, causing her to be strangled, according to CPSC records.

NO PLACE FOR A CHILD.

Injuries to young children associated with snow blowers run the gamut from finger injuries to lacerations, and in the worst case, strangulations when a child’s clothing gets caught.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

BEFORE THE START THE INSPECTION

- Inspect your snow blower thoroughly before each use.
- Part of following snow blower safety rules involves keeping the machine in good repair, so make a point of ensuring the machine has enough oil and that its tires are inflated properly before use.
- If you are using an electric snow blower, check the cord to make sure that it hasn’t become frayed or damaged

GENERAL SNOW BLOWER SAFETY TIPS

- Before you use a snow blower for the first time, be sure to read the manual thoroughly. Even if you have used one of these machines before, there may be specific instructions that pertain to that particular model. It’s a good idea to review the manual before the first time you use the snow blower each winter to refresh your memory about the proper way to operate it.
- The shields that come with a snow blower are an important safety feature, and they should be kept in place.
- Keep your hands away from the moving parts when the machine is in operation. If you need to clear a blockage in the machine, shut it down first. Use a long stick to dislodge any snow or debris before you start it again.
- Do not start the snow blower in an enclosed area. Always move it outside before you hit the start button.
- Keep in mind that the snow blower will pick up rocks, chunks of ice and other objects off the ground while in use. Consider the direction where the discharge chute on the machine is pointed before you start using it.
- Make sure guards are properly installed.
- Never use hands to clear snow from chutes or moving parts. Many snow blowers now come with a special tool for this.
- Turn snow blower off before clearing snow.
- Do not wear scarves or other loose clothing while operating a snow blower.
- Be aware some snow blower surfaces can become hot enough to cause burns.
- Wear sturdy footwear with good traction. Appropriate footwear will help to prevent slip and fall injuries. Consider using shoe or boot grippers, such as ICEtrekkers. These are also referred to as ice cleats or spikes; no matter what you call them, they will reduce the risk of a slip and fall.
- Stay focused. Pay close attention to the task at hand and refrain from the use of medication, drugs or alcohol.
- Start the machine outside. Do not start your snowblower in a garage or shed. Gas-powered snowblowers produce dangerous carbon monoxide
- Think about where the snow is blowing. Never direct the discharge chute toward people, traffic, or areas where damage can occur.
- Keep children indoors. Children enjoy playing in the snow, but hold off until after you are done snow blowing.

- Pace yourself. Although snowblowers are safer and faster than shoveling, you should still take rest breaks.

OTHER SAFE-OPERATING GUIDES

Be prepared for the whole job before you start. Wear adequate clothing—warm jacket, hat, gloves, and boots—and have enough fuel in the gas tank to complete the job. Stopping to go in the house for more clothes increases the risk of children or animals accessing the machine unsupervised. Being cold and getting snow in your eyes reduce your awareness and ability to see what's going on, and cold hands can also make it hard to hold the controls properly. And if you add more fuel in the middle of the job, while the muffler is hot, an overspill could ignite on it. If you must refuel, let the engine cool down first.

NEVER tape down the dead man's switch. All new snow blowers have a bar or lever that must be squeezed against the handlebar for the snow-removal operation to remain running. When the operator releases this lever or bar, the spinning auger (or in the case of two stage models, the spinning auger and impeller) that moves the snow shuts off. This may seem inconvenient at times, but it ensures you can't get your hands into a running machine even if you slip and lose your balance. The dead man's switch can prevent serious injury. Never disable it.

Start the snow blower outside. Any internal combustion engine can create carbon monoxide buildup when it's running in an interior space, which can kill you. If you have a two-stage model that allows you to plug it in to start the engine, make sure you have an outdoor-grade extension cord long enough to reach outside.

Clear your yard before the snow falls. Remove twigs, rocks, and of course any toys or other items from your yard so you have fewer things to worry about once they're covered with snow—and can become projectiles.

Protect your eyes and ears. Wear safety glasses to protect your eyes, and ear plugs or hearing protection to help prevent hearing damage, especially with gas-powered models. But note that you will not be able to hear kids or pets with hearing protection in place, reinforcing the need to keep children inside while snow-blowing.

Don't wear loose pants, jackets, or scarves. Loose clothing can get tangled in a snow blower's moving parts.

Use electrical cords safely. For electric models, use a three-pronged extension cord designed for outdoor use and an outlet with ground-fault-circuit-interrupting protection. Then be sure to keep the cord safely away from the spinning auger while working.

THE CLOGGING QUAGMIRE

No season would be usual or normal without the inevitable clogging!!!

How to Keep the Snow Blower from Clogging

Stay safe this season with these snow blower safety tips:

HOW TO KEEP YOUR SNOW BLOWER FROM CLOGGING

- Work at a brisk pace. The faster the blades and pace, the less likely the snow will stick.
- If heavy, wet snow is anticipated, consider snow blowing several times during the snowfall.

- Some people spray the blades and chute with cooking oil spray. This may help.

IF YOUR SNOW BLOWER CLOGS:

- Turn it OFF!
- Disengage the clutch.
- Wait five seconds after shutting the machine off to allow the impeller blades to stop rotating.
- ALWAYS use a stick or broom handle to clear the impacted snow.
- NEVER put your hand down the chute or around the blades.
- Keep all shields in place. **Do not remove** the safety devices on the machine.
- Keep your hands and feet away from all moving parts.

FINAL WORD

Simple maintenance and safety rules on the operation of snow blowers will make sure you get through another winter without equipment breakdowns or injuries. Snow blowers were designed to make snow removal easier. If you use a snow blower it is important to recognize that this machine doesn’t make snow removal risk-free.