

Misuse of snowblower could mean fewer fingers to operate it

By Jana Mortellaro

According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, it's estimated that more than 5,700 emergency department visits stem from snowblower accidents each year. More than 550 of those cases have required finger amputations. Some accidents have resulted in death.

Most snowblower accident cases sustain deep cuts, crushed and broken bones, joint, tendon and soft tissue injuries. And 90 percent of the time, the injury is to the dominant hand, according to the American Society for Surgery of the Hand. This typically involves loss of fingertips, most commonly the middle finger.



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Domestic danger

We may have a healthy respect for our lawn mowers and weed-whackers and their ability to cause harm, but we have to remember a snowblower is not any less dangerous just because it throws the -white stuff around instead of slicing plants away from the earth. So, before you put your snowblower into

action, make sure you take the time to use it properly and safely. Most snowblower injuries are preventable if you concentrate on the task at hand and use common sense.

“A severe hand-finger injury can be excruciatingly painful and affects all aspects of daily life – bathing, dressing, cooking, eating, writing, using the computer, driving, riding a bike, etc. Having access to hand therapy after my traumatic injury [from a snowblower] was critical. Therapy was my barometer during the healing process, and helped me to adjust, so I could attempt these daily tasks successfully,” said J. G., snowblower accident survivor and Barton Rehabilitation patient.

Here are tips to keep you safe while clearing snow:

- Read the instruction manual prior to using the snowblower.
- Never use your hands to unclog a snowblower.
- Wear protective clothing.
- Do not drink alcohol or use prescription narcotics before using your snowblower.
- Be sure the kids and animals are safely in the house.
- Add fuel to the tank outdoors before starting the machine.
- Watch where you're aiming the snow.
- Don't add gasoline to a running or hot engine.
- If you have an electric powered snowblower, be aware of where the power cord is at all times.
- Don't remove safety devices.
- Keep hands and feet away from all moving parts.
- Don't leave a snowblower unattended when it is running.

- Turn the engine off if you need to walk away.
- Never leave the machine running in an enclosed area.

In case of clogs:

- Never put your hands down the chute or near the blades.
- Turn it o-ff.
- Disengage the clutch.
- Delay/wait after turning off the engine to allow impeller blades time to stop rotating.

For more information about South Lake Tahoe's only certified hand therapy program, located at Barton Rehabilitation, call (530) 543.5896.

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