

Tis the Season for Raking

With the beautiful colors of the falling leaves, it creates a warm feeling of the seasons to come. However, there's the dread of knowing the raking has yet to be done along with the consequences of the possible aches and pains. But why endure the suffering of some people's favorite season of the year? The back and neck pain as well as shoulder soreness can easily be prevented by engaging in proper warm-ups and using good posture and raking techniques.

Warm-up exercise is crucial to do before any strenuous activity. It increases circulation in the body, providing the muscles, ligaments and tendon the nutrients, oxygen and even heat. Warm-ups typically involve anything aerobic, which means raising the heart-rate and sustaining it for 5 minutes. A fast pace walk, jumping jacks, and biking are examples of an excellent way to warm-up.

To minimize strains and sprains, it is important to stretch appropriately. The most ideal time for stretching muscles is after warm-ups. Just think of your muscles and tendon being like a rubber band after it is heated by the rich warm blood that you have recently got pumping through your body from the warm-up exercise. Stretching while muscles are cold will more likely cause small muscle tears than stretching while the muscles are warm. The major muscle groups used for raking include the upper trap (neck), shoulder, and trunk muscles. Stretching simply means moving the body part to the end of the range of motion and then applying a gentle extra force to increase the range of motion. There should be no pain felt during the stretches; just a pulling sensation should be felt. Holding the stretches and do not do any ballistic movements while stretching as it may cause micro-tears of the muscle fibers.

Maintaining a good posture throughout the raking is done by keeping the back straight with a slight lower back curve that bends towards the front of the body. Rotating, or twisting your back while pulling the rake is a common cause for back strain during raking. To avoid the twisting motion, pivot at the hips and turn your body as a whole can make a world of a difference. To further support the back, tightening the stomach muscles helps the back muscles by sharing the load on the spine.

While raking, avoid placing the body in a stretching position. Simply move the shoulder and legs in a comfortable range of motion. It is also important to avoid using full muscle force of pulling at the rake. During raking, if for some reason the rake gets caught or is unable to move because of the weight of the pile of leaves, the force of the muscle that was used for raking will place the very same force onto the joint of the body, causing injury. Hard and fast movement increases the likelihood of getting injured, rake using moderate force and medium, comfortable pace. When bending down to pick up the leaves, bend at the knees and hips while keeping the back straight. Taking a 5 minute break every 30 minutes is also helpful in lessening the chance of injury. Breaks can also be great to simply enjoy the crisp fall air and observe what work has already been achieved.

Of course these are general guidelines. Make sure to consult with your physician or a

health care professional to determine your physical readiness for raking or any strenuous physical activity.