How to Keep from Slip-Sliding Away This Winter

I was crossing Last Chance Gulch the other day when I came up with the perfect topic for this column.

There I was, lying on the icy street nursing my wounded pride and shoulder, when I thought: I should research ways to prevent falls on ice and snow. With the weather we’ve had lately, I’m sure I’m not the only one who needs it. It’s a hockey rink out there!

Fortunately, my spectacular slip was more embarrassing than dangerous. I wrenched my shoulder, but I didn’t hit my head or break any bones. I was lucky.

Unfortunately, that’s not always the case. In Montana, unintentional injuries are among the top causes of death for people between the ages of 1 and 44. There’s no way of knowing how many of those injuries involve a patch of ice, but in our climate, I think it’s safe to assume that more than enough of them do.

Here’s a statistic might give us some idea of the extent of the problem: The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 410 Montanans were injured falling on ice, sleet, or snow while at work in 2014. That put the Treasure State at a dubious number-one ranking for this type of workplace injury.

Slips and falls are not inevitable, even in Montana. Here are a number of ways you can protect yourself until winter slinks away:

**Before You Go Out**

- **Pump those muscles.** Strength training can help reduce your risk of falling by improving your balance. This can be especially important for older people, whose muscle strength tends to diminish with age.
- **Wear proper foot gear.** Yes, those fashion boots may be stylish, but their smooth leather soles will betray you on slippery surfaces. Opt for rubber or neoprene composite soles with deep grooves; they provide better traction. Cleats made for walking on ice and snow are available at most sporting goods stores.
- **Keep your vision unobstructed.** Don’t let scarves and hats block your view of where you’re walking.
- **Dress appropriately.** Cold temperatures can cause joints and muscles to stiffen. This makes it easier to lose your footing. Wear loose layers of warm clothing.
- **Go slow.** Plan ahead and give yourself plenty of time to get where you’re going.
While Out and About

- **Plan your route.** Try to choose routes that are less slippery. If a walkway is covered in ice, try to travel along its grassy edge for traction.
- **Pay attention.** Be mindful of what you’re doing and where you’re going. Now is not the time to daydream or plan your next meeting.
- **Walk like a duck.** Take short, flat-footed steps, bend your knees a little, and use a wider stance for stability. Stop occasionally to break your momentum. Never run on icy ground.
- **Keep both hands free.** Carrying heavy items can challenge your balance. Try to keep your hands free (not in your pockets) to better balance yourself. If you must carry stuff, consider a backpack.
- **Use handrails where possible.** You might even want to face the railing, hold on with both hands, and sidestep up and down stairs. Be sure to plant your feet firmly on each step.
- **Consider a cane or walking stick.** You can buy ice-gripping tips for even greater stability.
- **Watch for black ice.** If you aren’t sure whether a surface is icy, slide your foot over it before walking onto it.
- **Avoid uneven surfaces where possible.** Our hilly terrain does present an extra challenge in the winter.
- **Use salt or kitty litter to sprinkle on slick surfaces.** You can even carry a small baggy with you to use when you encounter ice and snow.
- **Use care getting in or out of a vehicle.** Use the vehicle for support. Step, don’t jump, out.
- **Remove snow and ice from your boots.** When entering a building, kick off as much as possible. Watch for floors and steps that might be wet and slippery. If you’ve been wearing ice cleats, remove them, too. They magically morph into ice skates on wet, uncarpeted floors.

If You Fall

- **Relax as much as possible as you go down.** You’re less likely to injure muscles if they’re relaxed.
- **Tuck your chin.** If you fall backwards, this can help keep your head from slamming full force onto the ground.
- **Roll with the fall.** Try to twist and roll backwards rather than falling forward.
- **Toss whatever you’re carrying.** Protect yourself, not your morning coffee.

Although I’ve taken a light touch in parts of this column, I can tell you from personal experience that falling on ice or snow is no laughing matter. For me, a poor choice of footwear and inattention led to my downfall (pun intended). If you remember nothing else, remember this: ice and snow mean take it slow!