Winter can really be rough on feet

By Gerald Gronborg, DPM

Winter can be a rough time for all of us, especially our feet. There are many problems that are unique to winter time, ranging from the minor to severe and extreme.

- **Injuries are common**—Sprains, Strains, Slips on the Ice, to Sporting Accidents. Many sports can be problematic due to the specific gear attributed to the activity. As you can imagine, a hockey skate supports the foot much differently than a ski boot or a snowboard boot. Custom-molded biomechanical foot orthoses designed to fit these types of gear can help tremendously to prevent many injuries.

- **One aspect that affects the athlete and non-athlete alike is the cold.** Whether we are out playing or working in the snow, cold is the enemy of the foot. Those who are vascularly or neurologically compromised are particularly at risk—
  
  - Frostbite will strike them sooner and often without warning.
  
  - When out in the snow and cold for extended periods, it is essential to keep your feet both warm and dry. A good insulated boot that is waterproof is preferred. Materials such as Gore-Tex, will keep the feet dry while allowing them to breathe. This prevents sweating that can lead to the feet becoming colder.
  
  - Thinsulate is also an excellent insulator found in many boots, helping to keep them warm. You should look for high-gram content.
  
  - In addition to boots, wearing thermal-insulated socks is highly recommended. Cotton socks, while good at wicking moisture from the skin, lose their thermal value when wet. Wool retains much of its insulating properties when wet, but has poor wicking ability. Combining the two can often be quite effective. Newer microfiber socks combine the best of both worlds, having multiple layers to do both jobs. They are widely available at sporting goods stores.
For those who don’t venture outdoors much in winter, you still could have your own unique problems. Many people ambulate in stocking feet around the house or in flimsy house slippers. While they may feel as comfortable as an old friend, they can lead to foot maladies in the long run. Walking in stocking feet or flimsy slippers can increase the risk of plantar fasciitis and other pressure and stress issues—

- With the humidity down and the furnace up, dry cracking skin becomes common, and is exacerbated by again ambulating without properly supported footgear. Heel fissures become more common, and in some cases lead to ulceration. For the diabetic and neuropathic this can become a crisis state. Daily moisturizing and foot inspection is crucial. Regular visits to the podiatrist can help keep these problems to a minimum.

This is certainly a brief overview of just a few of the problems seen more commonly in winter. But even for those with foot issues, winter can be an enjoyable, active time of year. Now get out there, be careful, and start shoveling!

BIO: Dr. Gronborg is a past president of the PPMA and currently acts as a consultant to the Executive Board. He is a physician with the Central PA Physicians Group with offices in Altoona, Bedford, Patton, and Roaring Spring, PA. The practice Website is www.centralpapg.com. He received his DPM from the Ohio College of Podiatric Medicine in 1989. He is a Diplomate of the American Board of Podiatric Surgery and a Fellow of the American College of Foot & Ankle Surgeons, as well as a Fellow of the American College of Certified Wound Specialists. He is a native of Erie, PA, and lives with his family in Bedford. Dr. Gronborg can be contacted at 814-201-2309.