

An Autumn Health and Safety Reminder  
by Jim Hancock



The cool moderate weather of fall is finally here and many of us are anxious to get outside and enjoy the crisp air, the beautiful autumn colors and the chores of the season. How relaxing it can be to set in the warmth of the sun watching and listening to the multicolored leaves as they cascade from the trees.

The downside to these memorable times is the sea of leaves covering everything on the earth's surface; sidewalks, roads, driveways and lawns. In some areas such as woodlands and gardens the leaves can be left alone to naturally recycle, but in others there are various reasons to remove this natural blanket.

Raking leaves is a strenuous task that can take its toll on the unprepared. In addition to the obvious physical demands of raking, the fall environment can be a health concern for many of us. Damp leaves harbor molds that can produce allergic reactions such as headaches, runny nose, itchy swollen eyes, bronchitis and asthma. Burning leaves can complicate these problems and also contribute to air pollution.

Since only about 15 percent of the population suffers from allergies, most people will experience no ill effects from exposure to allergens. However, if you are one of the 15 percent, it is best to avoid exposure completely. So now you have a legitimate excuse not to rake leaves, but if you just can't help yourself, some precautions can minimize the extent of symptoms. Ask your family physician about allergy medications that may reduce the effects of exposure. Avoid breathing contaminants by wearing a dust mask that filters out microscopic particulate matter including molds and other allergens. If you are determined to rake leaves, do so while the leaves are dry, don't wait until they become damp and moldy. After raking don't contaminate the interior of your home with exposed clothing, remove and wash immediately.

Another hazard to avoid in the outdoors is the bites and stings of insects, spiders and snakes. Many of them are still present under leaves and plants as the temperature cools and they become less active. Serious bites are rare but these critters are prone to defending themselves by attacking since they can't escape easily because of their slowed metabolisms. Just stay alert, wear gloves and other protective clothing and don't antagonize them if you have an encounter. Seek first aid or medical attention if bitten or stung.

Other health issues to consider before beginning the task of raking concern physical endurance. Many of us are sedentary during the summer months and venture out for the first time with no prior preparation. Get in shape or take it easy. Otherwise, the stress and strain can be too much for the body to endure. Heart attacks and strokes often result from cold weather exertions such as raking leaves or shoveling snow. Muscle aches and back pains are common occurrences when we over use unprepared bodies. Seek medical advice before beginning, especially older adults who are not normally physically active.

Always do warm-up exercises before beginning physical work. Stretching exercises will loosen tight muscles and help prevent stress and strain that can cause injury. Raking leaves doesn't seem like strenuous work but twisting, reaching, bending, lifting and carrying bags of leaves are actions that require conditioning in order to work safely. Don't overload the bags of leaves, especially wet ones and don't bend at the waist when lifting the bags. Bend the knees and keep the back in its natural curve using the leg muscles to lift.

After a day of working in the yard it's a good idea to do stretching exercises the next morning to relieve muscle tension. If you have someone willing to give you a massage, that's an extra beneficial therapy well earned. Take it easy and enjoy the pleasures of autumn.