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Keeping Fit for Yard Work and Gardening **By: Dr. Stephen O'Neil**

This time of year as the weather improves and the sun begins to shine, people are anxious to get back into the great outdoors. The same springtime activities that bring people so much pleasure can also bring many new aches and pains. Just as seeds and plants lay dormant in the winter and come to life in the spring, many of us lay dormant all winter not using our muscles and joints. For this reason my office becomes a refuge for golfers and gardeners this time of year.

It doesn't necessarily have to be like this, there are ways to avoid the adverse effects of our favorite activities. Yard work and gardening seem to be the biggest culprits for causing spring time aches and pains. In fact, 88% of Ontario chiropractors report that gardening is the most common source of back pain during the warm weather season. It is important to realize that while gardening for some is a very pleasant past time and good exercise, it is in fact exercise and a physical activity and should be treated the same. Warming up muscles that have been sedentary all winter and easing into yard work is very important. It is equally important to use proper techniques and properly designed tools for the job at hand.

We should always begin by warming up large muscle groups with walking and stretching to ensure ample blood supply and flexibility. This will reduce the stress and strain on your joints. It is important to then ease into jobs. Don't try to conquer the whole yard in one afternoon. Break up larger jobs up into sections and take rests in between, at least three times per hour as a rule. Use these breaks to stay hydrated especially in hot weather. Remember when doing any lifting, always keep your back straight and bend your knees. It is also important to remember to keep any loads you are lifting close to your body, using your feet to pivot and always avoid twisting.

Always use the right tools for the job. Ergonomically designed, long handled, light weight tools are preferable. Be sure to kneel when planting and change positions frequently when raking, digging, hoeing or pruning. The key to avoiding injury is to not overdo it. Muscles that have been at rest in the winter months will not respond well to several hours of intense yard work.

When the work is done, it is important to stretch out tight muscles and apply ice to any areas that are sore or may have been injured. It is also important to stretch the following day and engage in some light cardio to loosen tight muscles. Remember to see your chiropractor to maintain proper motion in the spine and maintain optimal nervous system function.