

Ice, snow and slippery sidewalks: For many seniors, winter is “hip season”

Last winter, 72-year-old Dr. Herman Tyroler had to walk in an icy road to run his daily errands. It was either that or wade through the enormous snow drift the road crew had dumped onto the sidewalks while clearing the streets of his neighborhood.

“There was a period of about 10 days when I was forced to walk out in the roadway,” said Tyroler, a retired epidemiology professor who lives in Chapel Hill, N.C. “Moving vehicles were close by and the roads themselves were iced. I was concerned about my own stability walking on the icy road, but I was equally concerned about cars coming along with that residual ice on the road.

Southern cities like Chapel Hill rarely receive ice or snow. But people living in areas with lots of winter weather often face hazardous walking conditions. Many northern cities don’t have laws on sidewalk snow clearance. That’s true in Newton, Mass., where 66-year-old AnnaMaria Abernathy lives.

“Newton used to have an ordinance that said it was the homeowner’s responsibility to shovel his or her own sidewalk but we got rid of it two years ago,” she said. “People were saying that shoveling the snow was really the city’s

responsibility and they didn’t want the liability of it. They said it put the liability on the homeowner if someone slipped on the walk in front of their home.”

In winter, snow-blocked sidewalks sometimes mean Abernathy must walk in the street to get to the city public transit system. “Personally, I think they should restore the sidewalk ordinance,” she said.

Hazardous walking conditions are among many safety concerns of the Partnership for a Walkable America, a coalition of private, state and federal groups working to raise public awareness about



Often pedestrian access to sidewalks is limited during snowy winter months. Clearing roads for cars is easier, and can occur at the expense of pedestrian spaces.

the health benefits of walking and the need to make roads safe and accessible for pedestrians.

“Forcing a pedestrian into a snow-covered street exposes them not only to the danger of tripping or being injured on an icy street, but also falling in front of a car that may be passing only a few feet away,” said Charles Zegeer, associate director of roadway studies at the University of North Carolina Highway



Staying safe on snow and ice is a challenge for drivers and pedestrians. However, pedestrians are particularly vulnerable when walking near vehicles on slippery surfaces.

Safety Research Center in Chapel Hill, N.C. and a member of the Institute of Transportation Engineers, a partnership agency.

Snow and ice cause a substantial number of falls for pedestrians living in colder climates, said Dr. Jane Stutts, manager of epidemiological studies at the UNC center. Stutts recently completed a study of pedestrian and bicycle injuries reported at hospitals in Buffalo, N.Y.; Wilmington and Greenville, N.C.; and Modesto, Oxnard and Santa Barbara, Calif. Looking at emergency room data from three participating Buffalo hospitals, she found that nearly 27 percent of the patients admitted for pedestrian-related injuries between April 1995 and March 1996 were injured on

icy surfaces -- especially parking lots or residential driveways.

People ages 45 to 64 were most likely to need treatment. “I suppose that’s the age group of people who need to be out taking care of things,” Stutts said. “They also may be less agile than younger people. Kids don’t seem to have as much problem with ice as moms and dads do, and grandparents seem to be smart enough to stay inside.”

How road crews tackle snow and ice is part of the issue said Richard Knoblauch, director of the Great Falls, Va.-based Center for Applied Research, which has studied pedestrian issues.

“Perhaps the bigger problem is the way snow removal people -- in their eagerness to remove the snow from the roads -- often create more problems for pedestrians,” he said. “Frequently the snow is plowed off the roads and onto the sidewalks.”

Few U.S. cities clear sidewalks, said Bill Wilkinson, director of the Pedestrian Federation of America in Washington D.C., another partnership member. “Instead, they posit on the property owners the responsibility of clearing the sidewalks and more than half of the property owners fail to clean these things,” he said. “So what we have is sidewalks that are basically coated with ice and the consequence is that many seniors become landlocked during those times of the year.”

“My father is 81 and lives in Princeton, N.J. and he calls that time of the year ‘hip season,’” Wilkinson said.

With good reason. A broken or dislocated hip can easily result from an older person’s fall on hard ice,

said Dan Manz, immediate past president of the National Association of State Emergency Medical Service Directors, a partnership member.

“Falls for an older person are actually a substantial problem for a couple of reasons,” he said. “One problem is that when an older person falls, it frequently results in an injury that immobilizes the person in bed for an extended period of time and often results in secondary problems like pneumonia. Secondly, older people have other health problems like osteoporosis and other kinds of degenerative bone problems that can make them more prone to fractures when they do fall.”

Falls should be a real concern for older people, Manz said. “They need to be careful about their choice of where to walk and when to walk. And it would also be good if sidewalks would be kept clear of snow and slick ice.”

The Laws of Snow

Snow-piled sidewalks are sometimes an unintentional by-product of road cleaning, said Josephine Howland, a research analyst with the MassHighway Partners in Highway Safety in Boston.

“I don’t think snow is intentionally scraped off the road and put on the sidewalk,” she said. “But in the process of plowing the road, quite a bit of a ridge of snow does form at the edge of the sidewalk. Sometimes this ridge ends up being about four feet tall and some of it ends up falling onto the sidewalk.”

Many Massachusetts cities have laws requiring home and business owners to clear sidewalks within three hours after the end of a snowstorm, Howland said. If the storm strikes at night, people are expected to clear their walks as soon as they can in the morning. Violators can be fined.

“Some people simply ignore that law and that forces people to walk in the street which, as you can imagine, is a highly dangerous situation,” Howland said. “It puts the pedestrian at risk.”

Too Hazardous to Walk

For some senior citizens, snowy sidewalks are just too treacherous to risk, Wilkinson said.

“You get all these seniors who are trapped in their homes and apartments because the local government fails to exercise responsibility to insure that sidewalks are open and available to these people,” he said. “They simply can’t go anywhere for three weeks at a time and have to depend on family and friends to do grocery shopping and things like that.”

“I sometimes think about some of these seniors in urban apartment buildings who are living by themselves and I wonder how they get their necessities.”

People who want to use sidewalks in winter needn’t be trapped by snow, said Zegeer of the UNC center.

“City officials are often responsive to the needs and requests of citizens,” he said. “If enough people call and write their city representatives and let them know that it’s a priority for certain sidewalks to be cleared of snow, city officials will respond. Another idea is for citizens to urge city officials to consider the needs of pedestrians as part of their snow removal plan.”

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