



Spring thaw can often create conditions that lead to property damage and, more importantly, bodily injury. By law, it is the responsibility of the occupier (whether an owner or a tenant) to ensure that conditions are safe for people using and/or visiting the property.

If there is an injury, the occupier must demonstrate that an appropriate standard of care was applied. Given the potential risks and liabilities, it is especially important to understand the hazards of spring thaw and to develop grounds maintenance procedures to minimize or eliminate risks.

By planning ahead and implementing best practices, you can manage risk better, help ensure the safety of everyone who uses your premises, and protect your property.

Taking early action is paramount

Property inspection and grounds maintenance is an integral part of an effective Risk Management Program for any organization. In fact, creating and implementing a formal property inspection program is one of the most important steps you can take.

Your grounds maintenance program should include policies and procedures for carrying out regular general inspections, identifying problem areas, and resolving problems. A written policy should :

- indicate the frequency of inspections (monthly, at a minimum);
- identify the person(s) who will perform the inspections;
- include comprehensive inspection checklists; and
- stipulate that all custodial staff be required to read, understand, and comply with the policy.

Should an incident occur, a completed checklist that is signed and dated will demonstrate that adequate precautions were taken. An inspection program that allows you to identify and repair problems early on can also help reduce maintenance costs over time.

To ensure the safe condition of your grounds following a spring thaw, the following are among the primary measures to include on your spring maintenance checklists.

Grounds maintenance

- Remove any accumulated debris around the property such as branches, leaves, and garbage.
- Inspect the grounds for depressions, potholes, exposed tree roots, or animal dens as they represent trip and fall hazards. Repair immediately.
- Inspect parking lots for potholes, ruts, or loose chunks of asphalt caused by snow ploughing. Gravel parking lots should be levelled with fresh material.
- Inspect all walkways for uneven concrete panels and pavers caused by frost heaving. Make sure that all panels are still flush with one another. If the difference in height between adjacent panels is ½ inch (13 mm) or more, the panel should be re-levelled or replaced. If the pathway surface appears uneven, it may be necessary to lift the pavers, add more crushed limestone to the bed, re-compact it and reset the pavers. For asphalt walkways, inspect the asphalt for any cracks and depressions that can create trip and fall hazards.

- Make sure that all trees/large bushes are well pruned. Engage a professional contractor to perform heavy pruning and tree removal work to avoid injuries to your employees, volunteers, and property.
- Do not allow grass fires, or the burning of trash or yard waste on the property.
Grass fires do not contribute to the health of the grounds and these types of “controlled” fires can quickly become uncontrollable.
- Do not let water accumulate anywhere on the property.
- Cordon off hazardous areas and post warning signs.

Security system maintenance

- Inspect all exterior lights and signs to ensure that they have not been damaged by snow, snow ploughs, shovelling, etc. Repair and replace as required.
- Inspect surveillance equipment — e.g. closed circuit cameras — for signs of damage. Repair as required. Change wiping and cleaning cloths that have been used in raw food preparation areas immediately after use.

Building maintenance

- Examine all exterior stairs and wheelchair ramps and ensure they are structurally sound and in good condition following the winter. Inspect treads and handrails and repair as required.
- Check interior floors around entryways for damage from salt or moisture and repair as needed.
- Check window frames for signs of damage.
- Have the roof inspected every two years for signs of any damage or possible leaks. Replace missing shingles immediately to avoid interior damage.

- Clear gutters of any debris. This should be done twice a year to prevent them from backing-up. Avoid the use of ladders. Remove leaves and other loose debris as well as sludge or mud. After all material has been removed, flush out the gutters with a hose. Make sure that drainpipes are clear of obstructions. We recommend that you engage a contractor, especially if your building is more than a single storey high.
- Conduct a visual inspection of the lightning protection system. Make sure that any damage to the rods, tapes or lines is repaired immediately by a licensed lightning protection company.
- Check all outbuildings to make sure they are in good condition.
- Ensure that all tools and machinery are stored securely, for example lawnmowers, trimmers, snow blowers, shovels, etc.

Heating and Air-Conditioning (HVAC) Maintenance

- Engage a qualified HVAC technician to inspect the air-conditioning system and ensure that it is running safely and efficiently. This should be performed on an annual basis.
- Have exterior oil tanks inspected twice annually by an experienced person.
- Check for signs of blackening or corrosion and leaking around the oil line, filter, and valves. Immediately report any leakage to the fuel supplier, your insurance company and, possibly, to the provincial department responsible for the environment. Rust should be removed with a wire brush and painted over with rust inhibiting paint.

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