

Heat or Ice – What to use for my Injury?

Part of the HealthWorks Pain Relief Series covering ALL TYPES of pain

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One of the most frequently asked questions I get from patients is about the appropriate use of heat and ice for the treatment of an injury. There seems to be some confusion as to when to use heat or ice, what kind to use and how long either one should be applied. This article is meant to clear up the confusion surrounding these therapies.

First, Understand the Injury

Before we can decide whether to apply heat or ice, we need to classify the type of injury.

Chronic injuries are the result of overuse or a long standing condition. Examples of chronic injuries are overuse, tendonitis, bursitis, arthritis and degenerative joint disease.

Acute injuries are injuries that have occurred recently or as the result of a traumatic event. Examples of acute injuries are muscle strains, ligament sprains, fractures and contusions.

Hot then Cold for Chronic; Stay Chilled for Acute...

When dealing with a chronic injury, start with heat – applying it before the planned activity or at the beginning of the day. The application of heat will increase elasticity of joint connective tissue and stimulate blood flow to the area. This also helps to get the tissue loose and warmed up for daily activities. Heat is a good thing before the activity or at the start of your day.

After the activity or at the end of the day, ice should be applied to the chronic injury as a way to reduce any inflammation, pain or tenderness.

Similarly, for an acute injury, ice should be applied to help reduce inflammation, pain and tenderness. Use ice at any time that you can or the pain is great, but never, never use heat for an acute injury. It just won't help, and may, in fact, worsen the situation.

Cold as Ice, but how hot is HOT?

Another big point of confusion is what type of heat or ice to use...

When it comes to ice, anything frozen works. The most effective option is a **frozen gel pack** that can conform to the body part. But, if that is not available, a bag of frozen peas is a good second choice, followed by plain old ice cubes in a sack. Just make sure you have at least a t-shirt thickness of material between your skin and the ice in order to avoid freezing the skin.

As for heat, the only heat that should ever be applied is **moist heat**. Examples of moist heat are: a hot water bottle, hot bath, electrical moist heating pad, or a towel soaked in hot water. Just like you would do for ice, be sure to keep a barrier – like a towel – between your skin and the heat source in order to prevent burns. Never ever use a dry electric heating pad. It may feel good, but it will have adverse drying effect on the superficial tissue, causing the capillaries to release more fluid, which increases congestion in the area and slows the healing process.

How Long?

The general rule is 15 minutes per hour, with sufficient time between applications to allow the skin to return to normal temperature. A rule of thumb is that once the ice stops feeling cold (or the heat stops feeling hot) then it's no longer effective. Going long causes your body sends blood to the area to warm you up which in turn causes inflammation. And that's not helpful.

For you sleepy-heads out there, this means that you never sleep with the hot or cold pack on the affected area. It might feel good to start, but ends up being a bad idea – especially if it stays in place for long.

How helpful is heat/cold for my injury?

Ice and heat therapy are very beneficial to the healing process. In my experience, the proper use of heat and ice while receiving the appropriate treatment for an injury significantly speeds the healing process. Exact benefits depend, of course, on the nature of your injury, your condition and a host of other factors.

Do-It-Yourselfers Beware!

For those of you who like to just do-it-yourself and avoid the doctor whenever possible – know this.... most do-it-yourselfers will mis-diagnose or mis-treat an injury in the absence of professional advice.

So, if you have an injury, whether it is acute or chronic in nature, please do seek treatment from a qualified health professional. At our clinic, we provide quick and effective treatment for a wide variety of injuries through the utilization of Active Release Techniques (ART), Graston Technique, manipulation and progressive rehabilitation.

Come see us with a copy of this article, and we'll send you home with a FREE high quality doctor-grade gel hot/cold pack that you can use just the way you should!

Best of all for those who really hate the doctor visits because of the wait – you will be delighted to hear that we work on a strict appointment system that honors both your time and ours! Waiting is minimized, and because we treat injuries not sicknesses, there's not a waiting room full of coughing, sneezing and germs either!

Be careful out there, and do come see us next time you hurt yourself. You'll be glad you did!

Dr Katie