

ICE or HEAT: What is Right for Your Pain?

By: Dr. Brandon Crouch

Ice and heat have been recommended for years by health professionals to reduce pain and speed recovery of an injury. When used properly they can be very effective. Even with years of application, when to use them and which one to use is still very confusing. In this article I want to give you some general guidelines for how ice and heat are commonly used and for what injuries.

ICE

Ice treatments are most commonly used for acute injuries that have occurred within the last 48 hours. The purpose for ice in these situations is all about reducing the swelling around the injury. Reducing the inflammation (swelling) will help to reduce the pain.

Ice treatments may also be useful for chronic conditions, such as repetition – overuse injuries. These are most commonly seen with athletes or with someone who has a daily physical labor routine with their occupation. In this case, ice is used on the injured area after activity to help control inflammation. Ice should never be used before activity as it could make the chronic condition worse.

Lastly, ice is often used during flairs-ups of arthritis. Arthritis is simply inflammation around a joint. Although ice will not cure the “wear and tear” damage of the joint, it will help to control the pain often caused by the swelling.

HEAT

Heat treatments are often recommended during chronic conditions. The purpose of using heat is to relax tight and tense muscles while promoting more blood flow to the injured area. More blood flow will help to speed healing of the injured tissues.

Before activities, whether work or play, heat can be used to warm the tissues around the injury to help loosen the muscles. By relaxing the surrounding muscle tissues it will help to prevent further injury.

APPLICATION

Cold therapy can be performed with the use of a home-made ice pack, a store bought ice pack, or even cold therapy gels. Heat therapy can be performed with a heat pack, heating patch, heating pad, or heating therapy gels. When available, moist heat is better at reducing stiffness than dry heat. Moist heat can be achieved through heating a moist towel or by using a heating pad specifically made with moist heat. Most retailers now sell heating pads that specify “moist heat”. Be careful to not use moisture around electrical devices that emit heat (such as heating pads) if not recommended by the manufacturer.

Ice and heat application is best over a dry cloth versus directly on the skin. If ice is applied directly to the skin it can cause frostbite very quickly. Direct heat on the skin could cause potential burns. Cycles of 10 minutes on and off will help to ensure that the area is not getting too cold or too hot. Generally 3 to 5 repetitions followed by a period of rest is often recommended.

When used appropriately, ice and heat can be a great way to reduce pain and speed healing of acute and chronic injuries. In many cases, ice and heat can be even more effective than common over the counter pain reliever or anti-inflammatory medications. This is important since many people cannot take over the counter medications due to other health complications. The next time you reach for the ice pack or the heat pack make sure you think about your injury. By understanding the goals of treatment (reducing inflammation versus relaxing muscle tissue) your therapy time will be more successful at getting you back to full optimal health!

About the Author:

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