

Ice vs. Heat

Injuries call for both to aid healing process

Many people are confused when it comes to whether to use heat or ice after any type of musculoskeletal injury. Grandma always told you that hot, soapy dishwater would cure any ailment. You have read or have been told that you should always put ice on any type of injury, from a sprained ankle to a sore back.

But what is best, heat or ice? Generally, use ice for acute or recent injuries and heat for more chronic or long term aches and pains. Immediately following an athletic injury, ice is used to help decrease the adverse reactions to tissue damage, swelling and pain. Ice helps to lower the underlying tissue temperature which decreases blood flow and minimizes swelling. Ice also decreases nerve conduction speeds which helps reduce muscle spasm and relaxes the injured structures. It also acts as a natural pain killer.

Generally, ice should be applied immediately following an injury and until swelling begins to subside and pain is at tolerable limits. This is usually from one to four or five weeks.

To make an ice pack, get a one-gallon freezer bag and fill it with a mixture of half ice and half water. A headache bag can also be used in the same manner. The ice needs to be applied for fifteen to twenty minutes, several times per day for optimal benefits. Although the first five minutes may be uncomfortable, applying ice for an acute injury is the best and easiest form of self-treatment. After you have controlled the initial reactions to injury using ice, the body needs to begin the healing process, rebuilding and nourishing the damaged structures. This is when it is important to use heat.

Heat applied to injured muscles increases blood flow, brings in more nutrients, increases the metabolic rate and helps flush out waste products. It is also very soothing which promotes muscle relaxation, further helping the muscles to heal. Moist heat in the form of a hot bath or shower or a moist heating pad or packs, should be applied for twenty minutes, two or three times per day.

As with every rule, there is always an exception. Some people respond very well to ice and not heat, and visa versa. Just the mention of ice to some people and their complaints of aches and pains disappear.

My advice is to give both a try and find what works best for you.

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