

TO ICE OR NOT TO ICE.....

Many of my patients ask me whether they should use ice or heat for an injury. A general rule is if the injury is acute, meaning it has occurred within the last 3-4 days, or there is noticeable swelling, ice is the preferred treatment of choice. If the injury is more chronic in nature, then heat will help provide some relief to sore and stiff muscles.

Ice: ice is extremely important to use during the first 3-4 days of an injury. Ice will provide the following benefits:

- It reduces swelling - this will decrease the amount of time an injury needs to heal.
- Ice reduces swelling by decreasing blood flow to an area. While some blood flow is required to bring the healing cells to the injured area, the body always overdoes it and sends too much blood, that's why we can reduce blood flow without too much concern.
- Ice also numbs the area, thereby reducing pain.

Icing is an acquired taste. While applying ice to any injury, you will usually experience the following sensations: cold then aching then burning then numbness. I generally recommend that patients apply the ice for 15 to 20 minutes every 1-2 hours throughout the day. Some examples of ice packs include a bag of frozen vegetables like peas or corn that can be reused, ice chips in a Ziploc bag or commercial gel packs. You can construct your own gel pack by mixing 50% water and 50% rubbing alcohol in a Ziploc bag and freezing it. Injuries such as sprained ankles which require ice and compression respond well to tensor bandages which have been soaked in ice water before being wrapped around the swollen area.

Heat: heat is used when you wish to increase blood flow to a body part. It's usually used in chronic conditions. For example, if you strained your calf muscle 3 months ago and it's still very tight and sore, applying heat to area will bring blood to the muscle and loosen things up thereby allowing you to stretch the muscle easier. Remember to always use moist heat on muscles and joints. Dry heat from an electric heating pad, really only heats the surface of the skin. It doesn't penetrate deep into the muscles like moist heat. Examples of moist heat include microwaving a wet towel for a few minutes, a hot tub/bath or a hot shower.

Contrast (Ice & Heat) baths: to create a pumping action within the muscle you may want to try a contrast bath. With a contrast bath you would put the affected body part in ice cold water for 3 minutes and then hot water for 3 minutes and alternate between the two for up to 20-25 minutes. This can also be accomplished in the shower by alternating between hot and cold water.

Epsom salts baths: soak in a hot bath with about 1-2 cups of Epsom salts. Epsom salts have magnesium in them and this helps pull inflammation out of the muscles and joints. I often recommend a hot bath with Epsom salts after a long workout when the muscles are just aching. I also recommend Epsom salt baths or contrast baths once a week as a preventative measure. Epsom salts can also be used locally. A bucket of water works well to soak a sore wrist or elbow, a small towel soaked in water with Epsom salts can be wrapped around a sore Achilles tendon to decrease swelling. If you use the towel method, use a bowl with 1-2 cups of Epsom salts, soak the towel, wring it out, place it over the stiff or sore area, wrap a plastic bag around it to keep in the heat, and then wrap a towel or tensor bandage around everything to hold it in place.

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