



Ice vs. Heat for Injuries

The application of ice or heat on an aching muscle depends on the stage of the injury. All muscle pain is not created equal. Ice is best used on acute injuries that have just occurred (up to 48 hours). Heat works well on chronic injuries that are reoccurring and on injuries that are in the maturation stage (when mobility and strength is the focus).

Ice decreases pain directly, reduces swelling and inflammation, and perhaps most importantly, decreases metabolism of the cells so they don't need more oxygen than is available. The result is less damaged tissue and a smaller area to be repaired. Also, there is less swelling and repair can therefore begin sooner. In order to benefit from ice you must use it correctly. Avoid putting ice directly on the skin, first wrap the ice or ice pack in a heavy towel or plastic bag then apply. Chill the injured area for 6 to 20 minutes, or until it gets numb (icing for more than 20 minutes may damage skin and nerves). Ice is contraindicated for someone with circulatory insufficiencies, Raynaud's Disease, or cold allergies.

Heat decreases muscle spasms directly, which reduces pain. It also increases circulation of blood, which brings new oxygen to injured areas and increases metabolism and vasodilation, all of which help in the healing process. To be used properly, heat should be applied to the aching muscles for 5 to 20 minutes. Moist heat is recommended over dry heat. Do not overheat, or leave on for extended periods, as burning of tissue may occur. Heat is contraindicated for fevers, infections, acute inflammatory conditions, cardiac/circulatory insufficiencies, and malignancies.

Ice and heat can also be used alternately to act as a pump for faster healing. Inflammation is reduced, then new oxygen is brought back in to heal. This is most effective for sub acute injuries, (after the first 48 hours). Begin by icing for 20 minutes, follow with 5 to 7 minutes of heat, and end with 20 more minutes of ice. Then gently move and stretch the injured area. Repeat hourly, if possible, or at least three times a day.

The next time your muscles are hurting use the appropriate form of ice or heat.

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