

Physio Myth Buster: “I’m Injured. Should I use ice or heat?”

This is a great question and pops up daily at the clinic.

There isn’t a simple answer, generally speaking we can’t say that “Ice is better than heat” or “Heat is better than ice” until we logically and scientifically rationalise what you are trying to achieve by apply either. That boils down to:

- › What is the exact nature of your injury?
- › The problems you are experiencing?
- › The stage of healing you are at or how long ago you sustained your injury?

Using heat or ice can be really effective at helping ease pain and muscle spasm, helping you recover from both a new or long term injury. Here are some very simple tips to follow.....

Heat

A moist heat, like a microwavable wheat bag or hot pack is the best for.....

- › Relaxing muscle spasm or trigger points
- › Increasing flexibility & stretchability of soft tissues
- › Increasing blood flow
- › Easing pain, linked to muscle spasm
- › Improving mobility
- › Heat shouldn’t be used in the first 48hrs of an injury

Ice

An ice pack, is best used for.....

- › Relieving pain in acute, inflammatory injuries. (Ice slows conduction speeds of the nerves, temporarily dulling and numbing some types of pain).
- › Using immediately after suffering an acute injury, such as a sprains, strain or bump. It’s particularly useful if the area is hot and swollen. It helps to limit excess inflammation and swelling.
- › Ice is also very useful to use to ease any aggravation and increased swelling if you’ve overdone things whilst and injury is healing.

Quick Guide

	Ice	Heat
Body Part / Area	Joints & soft tissues in arms or legs.	Neck, pelvis & back area.
Injury	Strain, sprain or bump to ligaments, joints or muscles.	Muscle spasm, tightness & reduced mobility.
Aims	Reduce pain, inflammation & swelling.	Increase blood flow, relax spasm & improve mobility.

So, next time you’re in pain and someone advises you to heat your inflamed, angry, swollen ankle or ice your tight, stiff, knotted neck and shoulders, refer to this simple guide and be confident of making the right start to easing your symptoms and supporting your recovery.

COLD

When to use it?

- Immediately on acute injuries - sprains, strains, bumps & swelling
- After increased activity or exercise when there is heat or swelling

How does it work?

- Slows blood flow to the area, limiting bleeding into the surrounding tissues
- Reduces inflammation and prevents further swelling and bruising
- Numbs the local area, providing pain relief

How to apply:

- Ice pack
- Frozen veg - peas work well!
- Immersing in cold water - particularly hands & feet!

Top Tips:

- DO use cold source over clothes or wrapped in a towel to protect skin
- DON'T leave cold on for longer than 15-20 minutes at a time, there is no extra benefit and it may cause an ice burn
- DO check skin condition before and during icing, avoiding open wounds and areas of poor circulation
- DON'T apply to stiff joints - it will make them stiffer
- DO use on a regular basis - every 1 - 2 hours



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So, you're in pain or have an injury - what do you grab a bag of frozen peas or reach for a hot water bottle? Have a look at our quick reference guide to find out when to use heat vs cold therapy.

For further expert help or advice, please get in touch!

HOT

When to use it?

- If you have tight or stiff joints or muscles
- 48 hours AFTER an acute injury

How does it work?

- Helps to open the blood vessels and increase the blood flow to the affected area
- Relaxes muscles in spasm by increasing their core temperature
- Eases stiffness in tight tendons, ligaments, joints & muscles

How to apply:

- Wheat bag
- Hot water bottle
- Hot bath or shower
- Heat patches (stick on)

Top Tips:

- DO wrap the heat source in a towel or put over clothes to protect from burns
- DON'T leave the heat on for more than 20 minutes at a time
- DO check the skin before applying heat, avoiding open wounds, infection & areas of poor circulation
- DON'T apply heat over an area that is bruised, swollen or warm to touch
- DO use on a regular basis - every 2-3 hours
- DON'T worry if your skin looks pink after the treatment - this is normal & shows increased blood flow