

# Hot vs Cold: What to use?



OR



There is much confusion over whether to use ice or heat when you are hurting. This is a basic guideline to help you sort it out. **However, the bottom line is, use whatever feels best and works for you!**

## **Ice is for injuries:**

Ice brings down inflammation in red, hot swollen, bruised, damaged tissues. Ice helps to control the pain that goes along with inflammation. An example of an injury: ankle sprain, car accident, fall, etc. Anything that has just occurred and feels hot and swollen.

## **Heat is for muscles:**

Heat takes the edge of the pain of muscle spasms, knots and trigger points. Heat is also very soothing and can help to ease the psychological stress that often goes with pain.

## **What they are not good for:**

Heat can make inflammation worse and ice can make muscle spasms worse. Both are useless if unwanted; for example, icing when you're already cold or applying heat when you're sweating.

Do not put heat on a freshly injured area; like an ankle or knee sprain.

Ice on a muscle spasm may make the muscle contraction worse. This is especially true in the low back and neck.

## **And:**

Low back pain is usually from tight muscles, not inflammation so heat is usually better. Unless, of course, it is a true inflammatory condition/injury.

How to tell the difference between muscle strain and inflammatory back pain: Did the pain hit you suddenly during strong stretching or exercise? Were you lifting something too heavy or awkward? Is there a spot in the muscle that's extremely sensitive to poking? Is the skin flushed and hot? Then ice may be better at first.

Necks are more likely to suffer from inflammation than lower backs. This is because it is much easier to injure your neck than your lower back.

When there is an actual injury to a back or joint: ice is usually helpful for the first 72 hours. Then heat can be applied.

### **How long to ice?**

This depends on the thickness of the tissue being iced. Ice treatments are generally recommended for 15-20 minute applications. It may be in the form of real ice or one of the commercial substitutes. These applications are commonly used 4-6 times during the first 48 hours after a soft-tissue injury. It is crucial to always cover the ice pack with a lightweight cloth so that it does not directly touch the skin. Putting the ice pack directly on the skin, using it for longer periods, or applying it too often could result in tissue damage – including frostbite!

### **What about heat?**

Moist heat is the most effective form in my opinion. This can be hot baths, steamed towels, microwaveable gel packs or electric heating pads. Heating sessions can be from 15-30 minutes and can be repeated throughout the day. Make sure to place a towel or some insulation between your skin and a direct heating element. If using an electric heating pad: Apply for no more than 30 minutes; place a cloth layer between the heating pad and the skin, the first few times the heating pad is used, check the skin every 5 minutes to make sure there is no burning; the setting on the heating pad should be at the minimum level where you still feel heat, a higher setting is not better, just more likely to burn.

### **How long should I wait between ice or heat sessions?**

With any heating or icing, if a repeat session is needed, wait until the skin is completely back to normal in appearance and temperature. This usually takes between 30 and 60 minutes, depending on the individual's response. Never reapply heat or ice before the skin has completely recovered.

### **Contraindications for heat or ice therapy:**

Heat: Dermatitis, deep vein thrombosis, diabetes, peripheral vascular disease, open wound, severe cognitive impairment. Check with doctor if diagnosed with heart disease or hypertension.

Ice: Raynauds phenomenon, cold hypersensitivity, open wounds, arthymia, angina, CHD, hypertension.

**Remember:** The most important rule is **apply what feels best to you at the time**. Everyone is different and our bodies respond differently. If ice or heat increases pain, stop and try the other.