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The Use of Heat and Cold

The generally accepted rule with sprains and strains is to use cold for the first 24-48 hours followed by heat. The intent in that protocol is to use cold to initially reduce pain and swelling to help assist healing and mobility followed with heat to increase blood flow after the inflammatory process has waned.

Some of my clients tell me cold works the best for them, while others tell me that only heat gives them relief. If a client is suffering from muscular complaints that are not acute then the goal is to promote blood flow to the muscle tissue since most muscle pain is due at least in part to anoxia (reduced oxygen levels).

Every human is unique and neither heat nor cold will be an absolute help or hindrance to everyone. Remember, the body always works to maintain stasis or balance. That is why you sweat in the summer for evaporative cooling and shiver in the winter to generate heat. The body's need for stasis can be valuable information in helping you use heat and cold in your self care. Why? After 15-20 minutes you end up with converse effects with heat and cold. Heat initially brings more blood to the area, and cold initially reduces

the circulation to the region it is applied to. But after 15-20 minutes an interesting thing begins to happen. The brain wises up and the effects are reversed to maintain stasis. So how do you get around that process? Many trainers use a simple technique called contrast therapy which consists of alternating heat and cold.

My suggestion for body areas like the knee and wrist and elbow are 5H-5C-5H, meaning five minutes of heat, followed directly by five minutes of cold, followed again by five minutes of heat. In the bulkier muscles like the hips and back the ratio can change to 10H-10C-10H. My clients usually find this method of contrasting heat and cold to be much more helpful than using either heat or cold independently.

In addition to helping prevent the brain from counteracting your efforts, contrasting heat and cold can help to manually contract and expand blood vessels to bring more oxygen rich blood to the affected area. A bag of frozen veggies and a good heating pad can work wonders. Till next time,

"Many trainers use a simple technique called contrast therapy which consists of alternating heat and cold."

-John C. Gifford, CBPM, NCTMB
Owner, Motionwise®



John Gifford has performed over 40,000 sessions as an approved provider of sports massage and a unique style of bodywork called Bonnie Prudden Myotherapy® and Exercise Therapy®. His mission as a clinician, lecturer, consultant, and author is to empower people to lead more active, successful, and fulfilling lives through the reduction and prevention of their muscular pain and tension.