

ICE or HEAT: Which should you use?

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Following injury, patients can get a head start on healing with the appropriate home care decisions.

Most people apply heat to the injured area, assuming that it needs to be loosened up and fearing that ice will make it painful and stiff.

→ In general, following acute injury or pain, ICE should be used for the first 48-72 hours. Some conditions benefit from even longer periods of icing.

Ice application is used for:

- decrease in inflammation
- decreased swelling
- decreased pain
- acute injury
- re-exacerbation of an old injury
- osteoarthritis flare ups

Instructions for using ice:

Gel ice pack or bag of ice:

- be sure to have a paper towel or cloth between the ice pack and your skin
- ice for 10-15 minutes, every other hour, as needed
- if icing an arm or leg injury, elevate the extremity

Ice massage:

- use an ice cube or water frozen in a Dixie cup with the top rim ripped off
- massage the area for 4-6 minutes or until numb
- do not ice past numbness.

When to use heat:

→ Heat application can be utilized for stiff and tight muscles or 3-4 days after an acute injury. If swelling is still present, ice should be continued.

Heat application is used for:

- increasing blood flow
- reducing muscle spasm
- increase elasticity of soft tissues

Instructions for heating:

- use a moist hot pack if possible
- only heat the area for 15-20 minutes
- don't fall asleep with a heating pad
- place a towel between the heat source and your skin
- discontinue immediately if mottling (white areas intermixed with red splotches) appears on the skin

-These instructions for home care should not replace consultation with a doctor.

-Those with circulation problems, skin sensitivity (diabetics), or open wounds should discuss their injury with a doctor prior to applying ice or heat.