

WHEN TO USE ICE OR HEAT

Question: I have recurrent back pain. When should I use ice or heat?

Answer: Ice. Ice. Ice. Occasionally, you can use heat. Let me explain.

In our chiropractic practice, we prescribe ice about 90% of the time and heat the remainder. When your back pain flares-up, it is inflamed. The muscles, joints, ligaments and nerves will become irritated and swollen. This is the time that you use ice. Ice has anti-inflammatory effects, which reduce the local swelling. As the inflammation decreases, so will your pain. This is why anti-inflammatory medications are so popular and widespread, such as Vioxx, Celebrex and Bextra. These are prescribed regularly on an ongoing basis for people for joint and muscle pain because inflammation is the first response by your body.

Ice is not fun. It is not soothing and comfortable like heat treatments. Therefore, people are reluctant to use it. In fact, when you first put ice on your back, it may actually cause more aching and burning before it becomes numb. Patients are often alarmed by this and worry that their condition is worsening. Actually, this is a normal response and lasts about 5-10 minutes. We recommend using ice for 20 minutes at a time every hour or two. In other words, if your pain is rather severe, you can use ice for 20 minutes on, then 40 minutes off then back on again for 20 minutes. You can repeat this multiple times in a day. We recommend that you ice three or four times for moderate pain and up to ten times for severe pain.

When you apply the ice, do not put a thick barrier between the ice and the skin. You simply want a thin dishtowel or paper towel to simply protect your skin. If your skin is particularly sensitive, you can use Vaseline on the skin to also protect this. The one big problem with repeated ice treatments is burning your skin. This will happen if you put too much pressure on the ice pack and drive this into your skin. Simply lay it on your back or on the painful joint.

It doesn't matter how you get this cold. You can use ice cubes in plastic bags. You can use gel packs that mold around the area. You can actually use frozen peas or frozen corn! You can make a slushy with three parts water and one part rubbing alcohol. Put this into a plastic bag and then place another bag on the outside. One bag is sure to leak. Now you have a flexible ice pack that is quite cold.

How long should you apply ice? Until your pain is significantly reduced. Often, doctors tell you to use ice for the first 24-48 hours and then switch to heat. I disagree with this. Your particular episode of inflammation may last much longer and not be resolved in one or two days. It is not unusual for us to keep someone on ice for 2-4 weeks before all the inflammation is gone.

Next you can move on to that soothing, comforting heat that we all crave. This is a more comfortable treatment and can help with additional healing as well as loosening up tight muscles. Once again, we recommend 20 minute treatments. Typically, you will use heat 3-4 times per day at most.

If you are not sure whether to use ice or heat, always use ice. If the area is inflamed, the ice will be helpful but heat will actually bring in more inflammation. If you have poor circulation, or are a diabetic or have extremely sensitive skin, consult your chiropractor or medical doctor before applying ice or heat.

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