

Ice or Heat — Which, and When

The commonest question, and the commonest mistake

THE SIMPLE RULE

ICE for a **NEW** injury, or anything hot and swollen.

HEAT for **OLD**, stiff, aching muscles and joints.

Putting heat on a fresh injury or a hot swollen joint increases the bleeding and swelling and makes it worse. This is the most common self-treatment error we see.

Ice (cold fomentation)

Use it for: the first 48 to 72 hours after a sprain, strain, fall or operation · any joint that is hot, red and swollen · a flare of gout · after exercise or physiotherapy that has aggravated things.

- **15 to 20 minutes at a time, every 2 to 3 hours** while awake.
- **Always wrap the ice in a thin cloth.** Never put ice or a frozen gel pack directly on skin — it causes a cold burn.
- A bag of frozen peas wrapped in a towel moulds well around a joint.
- Check the skin every 5 minutes. Stop if it becomes white or numb.

Heat (hot fomentation)

Use it for: long-standing stiffness · muscle spasm and tightness · chronic back and neck pain · osteoarthritis stiffness, particularly in the morning · loosening up **before** exercise or physiotherapy.

- **15 to 20 minutes**, two or three times a day, using a hot water bag, heating pad or a hot moist towel.
- It should feel **pleasantly warm, never hot.** Always keep a layer of cloth between the source and your skin.
- **Never sleep with a hot water bag or heating pad.**

DO NOT USE HEAT IF

The area is **swollen, hot or red** · the injury is fresh (under 48 hours) · there is an open wound or infection · you have **reduced sensation** from diabetes or a nerve problem — you will not feel a burn until the skin is damaged · over an area with poor circulation

Diabetic patients: be especially careful. Serious burns from hot water bags on feet with reduced sensation are common and heal very badly. Test the temperature with your elbow or ask someone else, never with a numb foot.

Search: ice pack, hot fomentation, heat therapy, cold compress, when to use ice or heat

