



Heat it Up or Ice it Down?

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My clients often ask, “Should I use heat or ice on my injuries?” Heat and ice produce different effects on the body. It is important to understand these effects and the nature of your injury before you make the choice between heat and ice treatments.

Cold treatments draw blood away from a congested area of skin, decreasing swelling, spasms and pain. Frozen gel packs are the most commonly used form of cold treatment. Use cold after an injury or for inflammatory conditions, such as tendinitis or bursitis. After work or physical activity, stretch sore muscles and apply ice packs to the areas of your body that are used the most to reduce inflammation and prevent injury. Cold applications reduce aches and pains with prolonged treatment (about 10 minutes) and can help relieve nagging aches which often wake you from sleep.

When cold is first applied to the skin, a message is sent to the brain that tells your body to produce heat. The skin initially chills and the blood is shunted internally, increasing the blood flow to the deeper vessels and organs. After three to five minutes, blood is drawn back to the surface and the skin becomes warm and red. This new blood is rich in red blood cells that carry fresh oxygen and nutrients to the tissue being treated. White blood cells, which contribute to inflammation, are shunted away from the area.

Heat applications increase blood flow to the area being treated. Heat does not penetrate very deeply into the tissues, but it is carried throughout the entire body by the circulation. Cell metabolism increases as a result of heat. Increased metabolism of muscle cells decreases muscle tone, reducing muscle tension. Heat applications to the skin will dilate vessels and draw blood to the area draining fluid and congestion out of deeper tissues.

During a heat application, white blood cells infuse the area being treated. White blood cells clean our body of waste products from damaged tissues such as in areas of tension. Toxins are pushed out of the muscle into the blood stream to be eliminated. Use heat on areas that hold tension due to poor postural habits such as sore neck muscles from prolonged computer work.

A common mistake made is the application of heat to tendinitis. Tendinitis is caused by repeat micro-trauma to a tendon causing inflammation (golfers and tennis elbow are common examples). When there is already swelling or inflammation in an area due to trauma or repetitive strain, you do not want to bring more white blood cells to the area. This could increase the damage and swelling already occurring. Even though the tendinitis has been occurring over a long period of time, the tendons are constantly being re-injured hence the re-occurring pain. Stretching the muscle and diligently icing after activities which cause tendinitis flare-ups often greatly speeds recovery time.

If you are unsure of whether to use heat or ice, ask yourself, “Have I injured my body through trauma or repetitive strain today?” If the answer is yes, then ice is the choice for you. Despite the initial discomfort, your body will thank you. If not, and tension is your culprit (often caused by poor posture), heat can melt away your pain. When in doubt, use ice. Ice reduces any inflammation if there is any present, whereas heat increases inflammatory reactions. If you are still unsure about which application is right for you, please consult your health care provider.