

The Proper Use of Cold and Heat Therapy to Manage Pain

As massage therapists, we encounter many questions and misconceptions on when they should use heat or cold and the proper use of each. Heat and/or cold can be an easy, effective, and inexpensive way to help manage pain and inflammation. However, improper use can also have some side effects if not used correctly.

We've provided some guidelines below on when to use heat and cold, as well as the proper way to use these treatments in order to get the most benefit.

INJURY STAGE	INJURY CHARACTERISTICS	BEST THERAPY
ACUTE (0-4 days)	REDNESS, HEAT, SWELLING, PAIN, IMMOBILITY	COLD
SUB-ACUTE (4 days-1 month)	SWELLING, PAIN, IMMOBILITY	more COLD , some HEAT
CHRONIC (more than 1 month)	PAIN, IMMOBILITY	more HEAT , some COLD

WHEN TO USE COLD THERAPY

Cold therapy should be used during the first 72 hours following an acute injury, or any time there is pain and inflammation that is not related to frostbite.

If the injury persists over a week, it then becomes sub-acute or progresses on to the chronic stage. The chronic stage persists if the injury is still present after three to four weeks. In the sub-acute and chronic stages of healing, both cold and heat can be of benefit. Cold may continue to be of more benefit when swelling remains in the area. Cold can also be very useful when muscle spasms are present because in addition to its anti-inflammatory effect it also can be neurologically sedating.

HOW TO USE COLD THERAPY

1. Store-bought cold packs, homemade ice bags or ice cups, and ice-water submersion can all be used for cold therapy.
2. Cold should only be applied for 1 to 20 minutes at a time. Time may vary dependent on the therapy. Generally you do not receive any benefit from longer duration after tissue becomes numb. Wait until tissue returns to room temperature before initiating another cycle of cold therapy.
3. If you apply cold correctly, the area you have applied the cold pack to will become temporarily white or blanched (blood retreating) then red (blood returning). This is normal.
4. Many people don't like cold. The following application takes the bite out of it. Take a towel and wet it with warm water. Next, wrap up the cold pack in this warm wet towel. Immediately apply the cold pack. The warm towel will help lessen the shock of having something frozen placed on your skin. This will also provide a moist cold pack instead of dry cold application which allows for deeper penetration of cold to the tissues and decreases the risk of over cooling the tissues resulting in unwanted side effects.



WHEN NOT TO USE COLD THERAPY

If you have a medical condition that affects circulation, then you should definitely NOT use cold. If you think you may have a circulatory condition which would make the use of cold inappropriate, then consult your physician. Cold should be used cautiously over areas that have previously been frostbitten. Caution should be used if you have high blood pressure, heart conditions, or nerve damage.



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WHEN TO USE HEAT THERAPY

Heat can be very effective during the sub-acute and chronic stages of an injury. Heat can effectively decrease pain, promote healing by increasing circulation, help tight muscles or muscle spasms to relax, and prepare stiff joints for movement.

Some common types of heat used in the home include: hot showers or baths, heating pads, microwavable heat packs, and warm compresses. All of these types can be effective, but it is important to remember that all are considered forms of heat when following the guidelines for using heat appropriately.

HOW TO USE HEAT THERAPY

While heat is one of the most widely used home treatments, it is often used incorrectly.

1. Heat should only be applied for 20 to 30 minutes at a time as it increases the circulation and it affects the nervous system. It may be tempting to use heat for longer periods, but prolonged use can actually cause muscles or joints to become sore or stiff and may cause burning.
2. Wait 60-90 minutes between heat applications.
3. Like cold, heat penetrates more deeply if it is moist instead of dry. There are several commercial moist heating pads available on the market today. If you have a regular heating pad, you can make your own moist heat. Place the heating pad in a plastic protective bag (you don't want to shock yourself!). Moisten a towel with warm water, wringing out the excess water. Place the moist towel next to your skin and the heating pad wrapped in the plastic bag over the towel. If you use a microwavable form of heat or a hot water bottle, you can also wrap that in a warm moist towel to get the benefits of moist heat.
4. You should never use heat rubs and heat at the same time. These rubs chemically stimulate of blood flow. They give warmth to the area and change the circulation to the area. If you have used a rub, then you should wait an hour or two before you use heat.
5. You should check the area you are heating frequently to be sure it is not overheating. Once you remove heat, the redness should disappear after 20 minutes or so. Never place heat on an area that is still red from a previous heat application.



WHEN NOT TO USE HEAT THERAPY

Heat should not be used in the acute stage of an injury. Heat should not be used by people who have decreased or impaired sensation. Some common instances where impaired sensation may be present include: diabetes with neuropathies, stroke, head injury, and nerve damage. Heat should not be used where there is compromised circulation. This could include peripheral vascular disease (PVD), arterial insufficiency, cardiac conditions, and diabetes. Heat should not be used over malignant tumors, open wounds or areas of suspected infection, an area that has moderate or severe swelling (edema), skin conditions, or with acute inflammation.

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