



Heat vs. Ice..... That is the Question?



Heat and ice therapy are among the most commonly used treatments in physical therapy to help decrease pain. Its use, however, leads to one of the most frequently asked questions we get from patients, which is better to help treat their pain, heat or ice? Follow these guidelines to help you sort it out.

Acute vs. Chronic Injuries

Acute injuries are sudden, sharp, traumatic injuries that occur immediately and cause pain. Signs and symptoms of an acute injury are pain, tenderness, redness, swelling, inflammation, and skin that is warm to the touch.

Chronic injuries are those that are slow to develop, are persistent, and long lasting. They are commonly the result of overuse, are usually subtle, and may come and go. Signs and symptoms of a chronic injury are dull pain or soreness.

ICE vs. HEAT		
ICE		HEAT
Use immediately after an acute injury, such as an ankle sprain. Also helpful in treating overuse injuries after activity or after sports/exercise to decrease or prevent inflammation.	When To Use	Used for chronic injuries or injuries without swelling or inflammation. Good for treating muscle spasm, sore, stiff or tight muscles and joint pain. Also may be used before exercise to stimulate blood flow, never after.
Wrap ice in a thin towel or pillow case and place on the affected area; do not place directly on skin. May also use a frozen bag of peas, an ice massage with water frozen in a paper cup or bag of ice.	How To Do It	Moist heat is best; use a hot wet towel or heating pad. Be sure to put layers of towels between skin and heat source to avoid burns.
Apply ice for 10-15 min at a time. Ice an acute injury several times a day for 48-72 hours post-injury.	For How Long	Apply heat for 15-20 minutes. Do not apply while sleeping or leave on for extended periods of time.
Helps to minimize swelling and inflammation around injury site to help decrease pain.	What It Does	Increases elasticity of connective tissue, stimulates blood flow, relaxes tight muscles or muscle spasm.