



Heat or Ice?

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A common question when somebody has pain is, “Should I use heat or ice?”

My response to that question generally is that if the injury happened in the past 2-3 days, then you should always choose ice. Otherwise, if the injury occurred prior to that point, it really is your choice.

Both heat and ice work to improve circulation to the injured area. Improved blood flow in the area will ultimately provide fresh nutrients to the area to promote healing. Heat works by immediately warming the area and causing the small blood vessels in the area to expand which increases blood flow immediately. On the other hand, ice initially creates a closing of the small blood vessels in that area, but once removed, the vessels will have a “rebound” circulation. For example, picture a garden hose that is kinked for a period of time to slow down the flow of water, and as soon as the kink is removed the water comes gushing through again. Ultimately, after icing, the blood flow to the injured area is increased for a period of time.

Ice is recommended for acute injuries (injuries in the past 2-3 days) because the use of heat initially could increase the inflammatory response and create increased swelling. Ice works well initially because it slows the blood flow and decreases the amount of fluid leaking in the cells which causes swelling. Ice also works as an analgesic, or pain reducer. It often numbs the area to reduce the pain.

Heat has the added benefit of relaxation. People tend to have increased muscle relaxation with the use of heat and it works to increase the elasticity of tissues and promote improved mobility. Heat may also help to reduce pain due to decrease in muscle spasms from relaxation.

Ultimately, if the injury is older than 3 days - you choose! Take into consideration your own tolerance to ice or heat. If you can not relax with ice on your injury, then it probably would not help to decrease pain. Physical Therapists can help you decide which would be best to use, and they can also provide additional help for your injury.