

Using Heat or Cold Therapy for Pain Relief

Heat Therapy

Using heat reduces pain by causing your blood vessels to open. This increases oxygen flow to help ease stiff joints and sore muscles.

Before you use heat, talk with your health care provider if you:

- have an infection, fever or swelling
- are pregnant or breastfeeding
- have cancer
- can't tolerate heat
- have poor circulation or sensation in your body.

What to use

- Use a heating pad (electric or microwaveable) or a hot water bottle.
- You can also use a hot tub, hot shower or sauna. (Be sure to drink water while you are using these options.)

How to use

- Place a clean, dry towel between your skin and the heating pad or hot water bottle.
- Follow any precautions for a hot tub or sauna.

How often to use

Use heat no more than once every hour for 15 to 20 minutes at one time.

When to stop using heat

Stop using heat if you start to feel numb or pain. Don't use heat on an area of your body that has a new injury.

Cold Therapy

Using ice or a cold pack reduces discomfort and swelling (inflammation) by numbing your nerve endings. It works well after a sudden injury or after surgery.

Before you use cold therapy, talk with your health care provider if you:

- have high blood pressure that isn't under control
- can't tolerate cold
- have poor circulation or sensation in your body.

What to use

- Use a bag of frozen vegetables, a cold gel pack, a homemade ice pack with crushed ice, or a frozen bottle of water.
- Freeze water in a paper cup for massage.

How to use

- Place a clean, dry towel between your skin and the ice or cold pack.
- Peel the top of the paper cup and rub the ice right on your skin until the area is numb. This should only take a few minutes.

How often to use

Use ice or a cold pack no more than once every hour for 15 to 20 minutes at one time.

When to stop using cold

Stop using ice or a cold pack if your pain gets worse.