



# Heat or Ice?

## **Do I apply heat or ice to an injury?**

Ice is best used for a new, acute injury to reduce blood flow and avoid swelling and pain. Heat pads and ice packs – the mainstays of every athletic trainer. So, suppose you suffer some type of injury, either a sports injury or a fall down the stairs. Would you know whether to apply heat or ice to the injured area?

Here are some general guidelines, although we can certainly advise you as well, should you have any questions about your specific case.

## **Acute Injuries? Apply Ice**

An acute injury is sudden and may occur as the result of an accident or injury (e.g., a fall off a step may result in an ankle sprain). Usually there is redness, tenderness to the touch, pain and swelling (the sure sign of an acute injury).

It is best to apply cold to an acute injury, to restrict blood flow to the area, in order to reduce swelling and pain. A form of ice that can mold to the injured area works well – this could take the form of a gel pack, a plastic bag filled with ice, or even a bag of frozen vegetables!

The rule of thumb with ice: apply ice for no longer than 20 minutes at a time; any longer than that and frostbite could occur, making a bad situation that much worse. You should ice the injury often (at least several times a day) during the 72 hours following the injury, allowing the skin to return to its normal temperature in between applications.

## **Chronic Injuries? Apply Heat**

Chronic injuries (i.e., lower back pain) require the exact opposite treatment. Chronic injuries also include repetitive sports injuries, such as shin splints. Heat attracts increased blood flow to the area and relaxes tight muscles or muscle spasm. Athletes often apply heat to a chronic injury prior to exercise or an athletic event for just that reason.

The application of heat can be as simple as taking a hot bath or shower. You can also use a hot, wet towel (make sure it's not scalding) or a heating pad. Never go to sleep, however, on any source of heat as this can cause burns to the area.

The general rule of thumb with heat: apply heat to the injured area for 15-20 minutes at a time, using a layer between the heat source and your skin. Do not apply heat if there is swelling or redness at the site of the injury. Moist heat works best, and a hot, wet towel is always available.

We recommend that you come in to our practice for an evaluation and any necessary treatment of an injured area to hasten healing. We will be happy to answer any questions you might have regarding this topic.

