

Ice and hot packs are commonly used methods to create significantly different effect at the cellular level within the body. A very common question that relates to injuries is “Do I Ice or Heat an injury? How long should I perform the treatment?”

Cold Treatment

Cryotherapy or treatment using ice or a cold medium is mostly used for acute injuries. Acute injuries are typically those that have occurred within the last 48-72 hours. Many times cryotherapy is used to treat swelling and pain. Using ice can create an analgesic (numbing) effect to enable someone that has sustained an injury to begin performing therapeutic rehabilitation exercises.

Ice is used immediately after an injury and for the first 3-5 days, depending on the amount of swelling. Using a 20 minutes treatment time to 2 hours in between is a good method to ensure that the tissue has time to return to its normal temperature, yet decrease swelling around the injury. This will also lead to pain control.

Many chronic injuries call for cryotherapy as well. Overuse injuries alike need ice to control some of the inflammatory processes that occur after PT and activity. Use the golden rule when dealing with a chronic injury, NEVER ICE AN OLD INJURY PRIOR TO PT.

Warning: if you apply any cryotherapy directly to the skin, be aware that skin irritation or even frost bite can occur. Please make sure to monitor the site of application and consult further medical attention if pain and symptoms persist or worsen.

Heat Treatment

The use of heat treatments can be used for chronic or old injuries. These injuries are well outside of the acute stage where no signs of swelling are present. This method will help bring blood to the area and warm the tissues. This method of treatment is typically done before any activity.

It is not advised to use heat after activity or during the acute stage of any injury. When using heat several methods can be utilized: heating pads, instant hot packs, heating towels, and warm baths. Never leave heating pads or any hot therapy unit on for an extended period of time, or while sleeping. The temperature of the heating modality should be comfortable to the touch. If you are experiencing intense pain, stop the treatment. Treatment time can range from 10-20 minutes.

Be sure to warm up and stretch well even after using a heating modality.

Warning: Be very careful with any heating therapy modality as burns can occur. If you notice anything abnormal with the skin or underlying tissues, please consult further medical attention.