



Safe Use of Heat or Ice

Introduction

Heat and ice have been used for many years to treat pain and to reduce swelling, and many people have found them effective. When used sensibly, they are safe treatments which make people feel better and can have some effect on pain and swelling with few risks associated with their use.

Heat

Heat is an effective and safe treatment for most aches and pains. Heat can be applied in the form of a wheat bag, heat packs, heat lamp or hot water bottle.

Heat causes the blood vessels to open wide (dilate). This brings more blood into the area to stimulate healing of damaged tissues. It has a direct soothing effect and helps to relieve pain and spasm. It can also ease stiffness by making the tissues feel suppler.

If heat is applied to the skin it should not be hot; gentle warmth will be enough. If excessive heat is applied there is a risk of burns and scalds. A towel can be placed between the heat source and the skin for protection. The skin must be checked at regular intervals.

Indications:

- Sub-acute or chronic inflammatory conditions.
- Sub-acute or chronic pain.
- Sub-acute or chronic muscle spasm or cramping.
- Decreased range of movement.
- Haematoma resolution.
- Joint contractures.
- Aching muscles from over-exertion.

Ice

Ice has traditionally been used to treat soft tissue injuries where there is swelling. The aim is to limit the body's response to injury. A sheet or pillow case should be placed between the ice and the skin for protection. The skin must be checked at regular intervals.

Indications:

- Acute injury or inflammation.
- Acute or chronic pain & muscle spasm.
- Post-surgical pain, inflammation and swelling.
- Small superficial 1st degree burns.

Contraindications and Precautions

Do not use heat or cold packs:

- Uncovered open wounds.
- Over areas of skin with poor sensation to heat or cold
- Over areas of the body with known poor circulation.
- Advanced diabetes.
- Over anaesthetised skin.
- In the presence of infection, neoplasm (tumor) or thrombophlebitis (DVT).

Also, do not use ice packs:

- On the left shoulder if you have a heart condition.
- Around the front or side of the neck.
- Peripheral vascular disease (PVD)
- Raynaud's phenomenon.
- Lupus.

Both heat and ice can be re-applied after one to two hours if needed.

Advice on using ice therapy

You can apply ice or a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a dampened towel to help control swelling and pain. Apply to the affected area for up to 20 minutes every 2 hours for the first 72 hours, reducing the frequency after this time. There is a risk of having ice burn or frostbite with application of ice therapy, it is therefore important for you to pay attention to the below precautions:

- Ensure you have full sensation around the affected area
- There is no broken skin
- Do not apply ice directly to the skin, always use a dampened towel to wrap the ice
- Check the iced area every 5 minutes. If there is excessive redness, pain or bruising, remove the ice immediately

Physiotherapy Department Sulis Hospital Bath
01761 422388