Use of Heat and Cold for Pain Relief

Every person experiences pain differently. There also are many different ways to help relieve your pain other than medicine. Using these methods by themselves or along with medicine to relieve your pain can be helpful. The information in this packet includes the steps to follow for each pain relief method. You may not want to use each method listed. Ask your healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Applying heat or cold to a painful area can help reduce pain. Both heat and cold decrease sensitivity to pain. Instructions on the use of heat and cold are included.

If you have questions
If you have any questions or concerns, call:

University Hospital and Clinics
- (573) 882-4141 and ask for your doctor, __________________________
or the doctor on call for
- (573) 884-9381 Anesthesiology Pain Clinic
- (573) 882-8091 Emergency Center

Ellis Fischel Cancer Center
- (573) 882-2100 and ask for your doctor, __________________________
or the doctor on call for
- (573) 884-3681 Symptom Evaluation Unit
- (573) 884-1836 Pain and Palliative Care

Guidelines for Use of Heat and Cold

Either heat or cold can be used for many types of pain such as:
- Muscle spasms
- Joint stiffness
- Low back pain
- Muscle aches

Cold is preferred when bleeding or swelling is present. Otherwise, use what you like. You may have to try both to learn which works best for you. Sometimes applying heat or cold to the opposite part of the body may give pain relief. For example, if you have a painful left arm, apply cold to your right arm.

Caution: Cold and heat should not be used in certain conditions, such as areas of prior radiation, poor circulation, numbness and tingling, areas of skin grafting, etc. Consult with your healthcare provider before using these therapies.
Use Of Heat

- Heat is used to promote healing and to minimize muscle spasm (moist heat is best). Heat helps blood flow, muscles relax, and soothes throbbing pain and stiffness.
- Heat is generally recommended to begin 48 to 72 hours after the onset of injury.
- When using heat, it is typically applied to the painful area for 15 to 20 minutes three to four times per day.
- To prevent burns, a heating device should not be applied over an area of the body that has numbness or tingling.
- If a burn or an increase in symptoms should occur as a result of the application of heat, discontinue its use and consult your doctor.

Source of Heat

- Heating pad
- Hot moist pack
- Hot water bottle
- Soak in a hot bath
- Stand under a hot shower
- Commercial or homemade heat packs (some are heated in a microwave)
- Over-the-counter heating creams, such as Icy Hot® and BENGAY®

Tips:

- Keep one layer of cloth between the skin and the source of heat to prevent burns.
- Body heat can be retained with plastic wrap. The wrap is wound directly around a part of the body, such as an arm. Plastic wrap such as Saran Wrap or plastic dry cleaner bags can be used.
  Caution: to prevent risk of suffocation, do not use with babies or small children.

- Wet and wring out a small terry cloth towel. Heat in microwave for two to three minutes. Hot, moist towel can be wrapped in a dry towel and applied for 15 to 20 minutes.
- Heating pads produce a dry heat. Do not use the pad on more than the medium setting to prevent burns. Never use a heating pad for more than 15 to 20 minutes at a time. Consider using a timer to prevent falling asleep while using a heating pad.
- Some heating pads can be used with water. If the pad you purchased is approved for use with water, use it in this way. Put a moist towel over the area to be treated and the heating pad on the top of the moist towel.
- You can use a homemade heat pack instead of a heating pad. These are usually cloth packs filled with shelled corn (not popcorn), rice or other grains that you can heat in a microwave.
  Cotton or cotton flannel are preferred covers for the pack to withstand the heat. A cotton tube sock can be filled and knotted on the end for an easy way to make a heat pack. You can also add aromatic herbs. Microwave time can vary from two to three minutes.
  Caution: those with allergies may want to use rice instead of corn.
Use of Cold

- Cold decreases swelling and pain, helps muscles relax, and numbs the painful area.
- Generally, cold is recommended for the first 48 to 72 hours after the injury.
- When using cold, it is typically applied to the painful area for approximately 15 to 20 minutes, three or four times a day.
- If you are using ice or a cold pack from the freezer, take care to prevent irritating the skin. Use a towel between the source of freezing cold and your injury.
- If skin irritation or an increase of symptoms results from the application of cold, discontinue its use and consult your doctor.

Sources of Cold

- Waterproof bags filled with ice and water
- Cloth dipped into cold water and ice
- Commercial gel packs that are kept in a freezer
- Bag of frozen vegetables, such as peas or corn
- Slush cold pack (see recipe)

Slush Cold Pack

**Materials**

- Ziploc freezer bag
- Alcohol
- Water
- Two large towels

**Method**

- Mix three cups water and one cup alcohol in Ziploc bag.
- Remove as much air as possible and seal bag.
- Freeze mixture overnight in freezer.
- Place towel between body part and pack to allow your skin to adjust to the cold gradually.
- Conform cold pack to the shape of the body part and cover with an additional towel.
- The cold will not freeze your skin when properly applied.
- Treatment time is usually 10 to 15 minutes, or to your comfort for a maximum of 15 minutes.

Ice Massage

1. Freeze water in small paper cups. You may put a popsicle stick in the water for a handle. These ice cups may be reused.
2. Massage over the injured area with ice. You don’t need to press hard with the ice cup.
3. The entire procedure should take five to seven minutes. Do not massage for more than seven minutes over a small area or for more than ten minutes over a larger area of your body.
4. If abnormal swelling, redness, or pain develops, stop the treatment.

In summary, this material has a few ideas to help you manage your pain problems through the use of heat and cold application. They can be used alone or in combination with other therapies like medication or relaxation.