



ICE or HEAT?

Applying Common Sense To Your Injury

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What decision could be easier? You've just injured yourself whether it be a sports injury, car accident, fall, lifting, twisting or other strain. Whether it's your back, neck, shoulder, knee or elbow, you simply decide on 2 completely opposite forms of early treatment, ice or heat. Then why do so many people still get it wrong?

Part of the reason is misdiagnosis and not looking at the underlying cause of the injury. The other part is rules carved in stone by some health professionals which sometimes defy common sense.

When an injury occurs the body immediately sends out an inflammatory response to the injured area, an event which is one of the very few times when the body is wrong. Usually the body has an incredible innate ability to heal itself but in this instance it treats an injury like it does an infection. This inflammatory response actually has an adverse affect on the injury and as such reducing it as soon as possible is key not only to a quicker recovery and pain reduction but also to prevent further damage.

If an area is inflamed it should be iced. What could be more straight forward? Hence, the "carved in stone" rule that you ice an injury for the first 48 hours and apply heat afterwards. Here's where the confusion begins.

What magical event occurs at the 48 hour mark where at one minute before 48 hours you're icing the area and at one minute after 48 hours you're doing the exact opposite? The 48 hour "rule" is a guideline only. If you're still inflamed 96 hours post injury you should still be icing. When you do ice, apply it using the guideline of the 10-10 rule. This means 10 minutes on, 10 minutes off, 10 minutes on, 10 minutes off and so on. When you're tired of doing this, put it for another 10 minutes. The more you can ice in the early going the better. If the body part is larger (i.e.: lower back) then the time can be increased by a few minutes, if smaller (i.e.: a finger) then decreased by a few minutes. Also ensure that the affected area is actually achieving the results you want. I have seen patients wrap their ice in towels so thick that the affected area is not even cool to the touch. A *thin* layer of cloth should be used solely to prevent frostbite which can occur on bare skin. Only when finished icing should you apply some Biofreeze or Deep Cold which should be lightly applied. Repeatedly rubbing in such a gel will actually result in a heating effect.

The second confusing aspect occurs in misdiagnosing the underlying cause of the problem. We tend to live in a symptom oriented world which means patients often judge the problem solely by their symptoms instead of what actually created the problem. Whereas a car accident or sports injury is fairly obvious, what does one do for acute low back pain? The patient will often feel muscle spasm and as such apply heat thinking that heat is for muscles. The problem is that the cause is almost always that the vertebrae or joints have become misaligned (subluxated) and the nerve is “pinched”. Since the muscles attach to the vertebrae and are controlled by the nerve, the muscles tighten in response. The “pinched” nerve, however, also causes inflammation. While heating the area may originally feel nice to the muscle, you are just heating the inflammation. **You don't need to be a doctor to know that you shouldn't heat an already inflamed area.** This is typical of the person who soaks in a hot bath at night. The heat will originally feel nice as heat does ease up muscles and it will de-stress you. However, these people wake up stiff as a board the next morning and can't figure out why. They've aggravated the situation by putting heat on an inflamed area.

It can even become worse for cases of an antalgic posture where the pressure on the nerve is so great that the body's self-defense mechanism literally pulls you over to one side to take pressure off the nerve. Obviously the muscles will tighten to pull you off the nerve but again we would not apply heat to the tight muscle as this would only be a feeble attempt to overcome this self-defense mechanism. (This is why I would never recommend muscle relaxants for an antalgic posture).

If it is a muscle problem and only a muscle problem (i.e.; no injury but rather a good workout) then heat is appropriate to speed lactic acid removal. With the exception of rare conditions like rheumatoid arthritis which don't really like ice, **ice is appropriate in 99% of the cases post injury.** It is almost impossible to go wrong with ice whereas heat can certainly have adverse affects.

I would also recommend a really good natural anti-inflammatory (the best on the market right now is “Acute Injury Plus” from Core Science). I much prefer the natural anti-inflammatories as not only are they effective but you also avoid the potentially serious side effects of all over the counter and prescription anti-inflammatories. (See my article “Anti-inflammatories – their side affects could be more serious than you realize).

Only when the inflammation is significantly reduced or eliminated should you then move to the ice and heat phase. Heat will serve to increase blood flow to the area and remove toxins while the ice will keep the inflammation reduced. In this instance the order of application is important where you should always end with ice to ensure the inflammation is not aggravated.

Lastly, ensure that your injury also receives the professional care it needs to address the underlying cause of the inflammation. If you are still inflamed a month or two post injury, you obviously need more than ice and natural anti-inflammatories. If a pinched nerve is creating the inflammation, you need to “unpinch” the nerve.

Applying common sense to both your injury and overall well-being is the best way to achieve optimum health and optimum performance.

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