

Information Sheet

Hot and Cold Therapy

There is often confusion over when to apply cold and when to apply heat to a soft tissue injury. The basic rule is cold in the first 24-48 hours then heat afterwards. Put another way cold in the acute stages and heat for chronic conditions. **HOWEVER**, nothing is ever that simple when it comes to our soft tissues and how they react to changes.

NB. This information does not replace a medical diagnosis but is intended as a guide. Always seek professional advice before beginning a program of self-help.

Cold Therapy

- Apply ice packs for 20 minutes and repeat no more than every two hours in the first 24-48 hours. Always cover with a clean towel to prevent an ice burn. The effect can be enhanced with rest, compression and elevation (see separate information).
- Cold reduces inflammation by constricting the blood vessels limiting blood flow to the area, when the cold is removed blood flows back to assist with healing. Regular application of ice continues this healing process. The more we can control swelling in the early stages, the less damage and immobility will occur in the surrounding tissues, making recovery quicker.
- Ice can help mitigate pain, as it has an effect on the pain receptors of the nervous system, limiting the sensations felt at the site of injury
- It is accepted that the body will move into a different phase of recovery after 48 hours which is why generally this is the recommended time period for cold therapy

Heat Therapy

- Heat always provides comfort, and that alone can feel helpful when in pain or injured. Heat can reduce pain signals and ease stiffness by warming the tissues and encouraging blood flow to promote healing.
- In chronic conditions such as arthritis heat can feel very comforting, and feel as if it is relieving the pain, but care must be taken if the arthritis is in an acute inflammatory stage. This is one of the areas where the rule may not be strictly applied.

Hot and Cold Therapy

- Using both heat and ice delivers a surge of blood flow to and from an area and can be hugely beneficial once out of the acute stage, when swelling has stopped and is contained.

Care

- Do not use ice or heat if there are any underlying medical conditions affecting the nervous system
- Contraindicated without specialist advice for diabetes, heat sensitivity, broken skin, circulatory illness

*Please note, this is intended as a guide to how you can use hot and cold therapy at home. Should you require any further or more specific advice, please do not hesitate to contact me.