

Should I use heat or ice after an injury?

After an injury, heat and ice are often used to alleviate pain and promote healing. But when should you apply heat, and when should you apply ice?

ICE

Ice is best:

- Immediately after an injury
- To reduce internal bleeding
- For pain relief
- To reduce swelling and inflammation
- To alleviate muscle spasm

Do not use ice:

- Before activity or in the middle of activity - an ice pack will reduce the sensitivity of the nerves, which helps to reduce pain, but sometimes gives an athlete a false sense that they're not injured. This can cause a second or more severe injury.
- In excess - icing too frequently or for too long can cause cold damage to tissues (i.e. frostbite).

When to use ice:

- Bruises
- Muscle pulls and strains
- Sprains
- Fractures.

How to use ice:

The sooner you can begin icing after an injury, the better. Apply for 15-20 minutes to the injured site. Continue icing every 3-4 hours while awake. Keep using ice for 3 days after an injury (the acute phase).

HEAT

Heat is best:

- To increase blood flow - this can be useful for chronic swelling, as increased blood flow can help flush out waste and promote healing
- To increase flexibility
- To boost metabolism
- Three days after an acute injury - after cold treatment for three days, the risk of internal bleeding is minimal, and heat can begin to help flush out waste and promote healing.

Do not use heat:

- On a new (acute) injury - this can cause excess internal bleeding at the injury site.
- After activity - heat can increase inflammation in already warm or inflamed tissues.

When to use heat:

- Chronic swelling
- Muscle soreness
- Joint stiffness
- Three or more days after an acute injury

How to use heat:

Apply for 15-20 minutes. Use a several layers of towel between your skin and the heat source to prevent burns. Do not sleep on your heat source. You can follow heat with gentle stretching or range of motion activities while tissues are flexible.

Always use your best judgement when applying cold or ice, and if you're not sure, ask a medical professional!