

How & when to use **COLD** or **HEAT** packs

Some conditions can benefit from the application of heat, or cold, or sometimes both. You may have been given advice by your practitioner, but can use the following guide as a reminder.

APPLICATION OF COLD

When to apply cold

It is advisable to apply cold packs as soon as possible after an acute injury because it reduces the swelling and pain. It should be applied immediately after the injury and repeatedly until the swelling has gone, (normally between 2-7 days).

Cold can also be used for overuse and chronic injuries such as a knee that swells up after walking or other activities. Apply the cold pack after the activity and continue with applications until the swelling has subsided.

How to apply cold

Ice is best applied using a soft cold pack but if you don't have one of these handy then a bag of peas will do. **It is best not to apply an ice pack directly to the skin as this can cause it to burn**, so wrap the pack or ice in a damp cloth. ("Raw" ice can, however, be applied directly to the skin if it is kept moving over the general area as it melts).

Always be careful not to wrap the ice completely around an area (e.g. tying it around an ankle) as this can cause a restriction in blood flow.

How long to apply cold

The length of time to apply ice or cold packs will vary depending on the injury site. e.g. A wrist will chill much more quickly (about 5 minutes) than a large area like the thigh (up to 10 minutes). If the skin is very red after the application then you may have left it on too long. Applications can be repeated every 1 – 2 hours, leaving enough time between for the skin to return to its normal temperature. Frequent applications are better than longer applications, we often recommend 2 minutes on and 2 minutes off for 10 minutes overall.

APPLICATION OF HEAT

When to apply heat

Heat is generally used for chronic injuries or injuries that have no inflammation – don't apply heat within 2 days of a new acute injury unless you have been advised to do so.

Heat can help to promote healing by stimulating the circulation. Sore, stiff, nagging muscle or joint pain is ideal for the use of heat therapy as it can help to relax tight muscles. Heat can be applied before exercise but do not use after exercise.

How to apply heat

Moist heat is best, so you could try using a hot wet towel. You can also buy special hot "wheatie" packs or heating pads, which may be more convenient.

How long to apply heat

You can safely apply heat for 10 – 15 minutes every hour or two. Never leave on for more than 20 minutes, or while sleeping.