

Physiotherapy Department

Heat and Cold Therapy: A Guide for Patients

Introduction

You have been advised by your physiotherapist to use heat and / or cold therapy at home. This information explains the intended benefits of this treatment and how to apply it safely.

Before using hot and cold treatment you should tell your therapist if you have any of the following conditions as this therapy may not be suitable for you.

- Heart condition e.g. Angina
- Peripheral vascular disease
- Scar tissue
- High temperature / acute infection
- Heart disease
- Insensitivity to hot / cold
- Deep X-ray therapy as treatment
- Skin conditions such as: Dermatitis, eczema, broken skin.
- Cold sensitivity (rash / itching)
- Poor circulation
- History of cancer or tumour

Benefits of Therapy

Heat Therapy can:

- Reduce pain
- Ease stiffness
- Warm up the muscles, for example before exercise
- Increase muscle relaxation / decrease in muscle spasm
- Ease stiffness
- Increase circulation

Cold Therapy can:

- Reduce swelling
- Reduce pain
- Decrease bleeding

How to make ice-packs

Ice packs can be made from ice cubes in a plastic bag wrapped in a towel or pillow case. A packet of frozen peas is also ideal, wrapped in a towel or pillow case to protect the skin.



Patient Information

How to Apply Safely

Heat therapy

- Make sure the hot water bottle / wheat pack is wrapped in towelling and has sufficient layers to avoid burns (**never use boiling water**)
- If using hot water in a bowl – the temperature should be between 40 - 45° C
- Do not go to sleep whilst using heat treatment.
- Leave on for 10 - 15 minutes and then remove.
- This treatment may be repeated up to three times a day

Ice therapy

- Wrap the ice pack in a damp towel, towel or pillow case to avoid ice burns to the skin
- Place over the injured area and leave on for 10 – 15 minutes until the ice starts to melt and then remove.
- Never leave on for longer than 20 minutes.
- This treatment may be repeated every 2 to 3 hours as long as the skin temperature has returned to normal.

Ice massage

Ice massage is used to decrease pain over a small area. It can be used to treat an area of 10cm x 15 cm. It can be used for up to a maximum of 10 minutes or less if pain relief occurs sooner.

- To avoid ice burn, wet an ice cube under the tap before applying to the skin and then hold the cube in a piece of kitchen towel.
- Apply to the area using a slow circular motion for 10 minutes or less if relief is gained sooner.

Hot and cold contrast bathing

This is used to improve circulation and decrease swelling to an injured area and can be effective in reducing pain.

- 1 tub of hotter water (40 - 42° C)
- 1 tub of cold (iced) water (15 - 20° C)
- Begin with hotter bath for 3 - 4 minutes then colder one for 1 minute
- Alternate, and then finish with the hotter bath

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Document History

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