

ICE THERAPY FOR MUSCLE AND JOINT INJURIES

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Ice therapy is an effective self-care treatment strategy for muscle and joint injuries. It is commonly used for acute injuries (within the first 72 hours), but can also be very helpful in managing flare-ups of chronic problems, and as a preventative measure following activities or exercise.



Ice therapy reduces the amount of swelling and inflammation at the injury site and also acts as an anesthetic to provide pain relief. Icing as soon as possible after an injury will help with speeding up recovery time, and minimize the chances of secondary problems such as muscle spasm and joint irritation.

Below are some helpful tips that should be followed when using ice therapy:

- Crushed ice and ice cubes are ideal sources of ice because they easily mold around an injury site and can stay cold for long periods of time. Commercial ice/gel packs and frozen vegetable bags are good secondary choices when crushed ice or cubes are not available.
- Use compression when applying ice to an injury site. Compression is most easily achieved with an elastic tensor bandage to add support and slow swelling. The principles of elevating and resting the injured site should also be followed during initial injury management.
- Ideal ice application time is 10 to 20 minutes. There should also be a period of 10 to 20 minutes or more where there is no ice application before icing is done again so that skin temperature can return to normal. This cycle can be repeated as often as necessary within the first 24 to 72 hours after injury or activity.

Below are some precautions that should be followed with ice therapy:

- Ice should never be applied directly over the skin for a prolonged period of time as this can damage skin tissue. A wet towel can safely be used as a barrier between the ice and skin and acts as an excellent conductor of cold.
- Ice should never be applied on blisters, open cuts or sores.
- Ice should not be applied before exercise or activity as this impairs your body's ability to detect proper joint and muscle function, making one more susceptible to further injury.
- Ice therapy should not exceed the treatment time recommended as prolonged exposure can reverse the positive effects of ice and can lead to possible frostbite.
- Special care must be taken when icing the elbow, wrist, knee, or foot as superficial nerves in these areas can become irritated or damaged with prolonged icing.
- People hypersensitive or allergic to cold and those who have a circulation problem should avoid ice.



If you have a muscle and joint injury that is not resolving, a qualified health professional can determine the cause of your pain and prescribe appropriate therapy and rehabilitation strategies specifically for your circumstance. For more information, visit www.nhwc.ca.

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