



## ICE OR HEAT?

By Craig Osborne, Chiropractor © 2010

The purpose of this sheet is to fill in some gaps and misunderstandings when it comes to self-treatment of musculoskeletal injuries. The major confusion seems to lie with whether to use heat or ice, and the correct timing of these opposing methods.

### R.I.C.E.M

This is the widely accepted method of initial treatment. Use this rule for acute injuries (i.e. really painful, recently inflamed, or if unsure what to do). It is almost always the most appropriate treatment in the first 24-72 hours. This includes virtually all back / neck aches as well.

#### Rest:

Stop whatever you're doing and rest the injured body part. This reduces blood flow which will help to minimise inflammation. Trying to work through the pain will almost always result in further aggravation. Quite simply if it hurts, stop. BUT, complete rest is often not useful and may slow progress, so try to remain mobile but avoid painful activities.

#### Ice

Cold packs are great, but ice cubes in a wet towel work just as well if you don't have access to one. Generally 15 –20 minutes on the site of pain, then 1 hour off for the first 24 hours, then every 4 hours the next day. Ice treatment



can usually be repeated as often as necessary but it is very important to allow normal blood flow to return between icing so that you do not damage the tissue cells by over-cooling them. Icing for longer than about 20 minutes is NOT recommended as the prolonged cooling can lead to tissue damage and the cooling effect is actually reversed.

Do not apply ice directly to the skin as you can cause ice burns. Icing works because the cold causes the small blood vessels to constrict which reduces blood flow. Although swelling is a natural response to injury, it seems it provide no assistance to recovery so anything you can do to minimise it is good.

#### Compression

This is somewhat difficult to do with the spine, but it helps to reduce the swelling that can occur with injury.

#### Elevation

Raise the affected part to try and limit excessive blood flow to the injured area. If this isn't practical, at least try to minimise excessive movement.

#### Medical / Chiro help

I wanted to write 'my chiropractor'- but you should as soon as practical seek professional attention with your injury. Too often I see problems that stem from old injuries that were never treated properly in the first place. We are quick to take pet animals to vets but seem reluctant to seek help for similar problems in ourselves. Get yourself checked as soon as possible, even if is to ensure that your injury does not require further care. Leaving a problem is likely to lead to a bigger problem down the track.

### HEAT TREATMENT

This includes hot showers / baths, topical rubs such as liniment, heat packs and massage. In the acute stage of injury this may feel good as it helps muscles to relax, but may be unhelpful to a speedy recovery. Only use heat after the RICEM stage or if directed otherwise. Most of the research into hot/cold therapy supports the use of heat during the recovery phase, as long as it doesn't aggravate symptoms.

### COMBINATION TREATMENT

Ice and heat can be used to aid in tissue recovery but only use at home under medical direction. Heat is generally used to first to cause slight inflammation to aid in healing, then cold to stop it from getting worse. Heat is sometimes in the form of massage.

### NSAIDS, PAIN KILLERS & ANTIINFLAMMATORY GELS

Pain killers are designed to prevent your brain from receiving pain signals. But contrary to some ads on tv, they don't target pain, they act on all nerves in the body which are involved in pain signaling. So use sparingly, if you dull the senses you tend to think things are better. Sometimes full awareness of your problem is necessary for safe treatment.

NSAIDS = non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as Nurofen and Voltaren act by reducing the body's natural inflammatory response to injury. Since the inflammatory stage of



most injuries is only for a few hours to days at most, taking NSAIDS after this time is now being shown to be a hindrance to good healing. If pain is an issue you may find that simple medication like aspirin or panadol works just as well. The gels work the same way but only penetrate to surface injuries, generally less than 1cm deep. Serious side effects to even low dose NSAIDS is very common, don't take this medication lightly.

Remember that all drugs have side effects, and many react with other medication, so only take medicines on the advice of a medical specialist and never more than recommended dosage The advice given here is not intended to provide specific treatment for your condition.

