

# When to Turn Up the Heat

If you are wondering when to apply heat therapy, read on. Traditionally, heat was applied to an injury soon after icing, but this may be counterproductive. Heat stimulates blood flow and actually increases tissue inflammation rather than decreasing it.

New evidence now suggests that cold therapy be continued every two hours for at least 48 hours after an injury, and heat applied only after the swelling has subsided. It is at this point that the healing effect of heat becomes evident as the increase in blood flow helps remove waste products. Other benefits of heat are pain relief, relaxed muscles, and reduced joint stiffness. If applied five to ten minutes before exercise, muscle soreness may be prevented. Hot packs can also help relieve the ache of chronic, dull pain. Treatment time lasts for 20 to 30 minutes, two to three times a day, or as often as necessary.

There are many types of hot packs available, but there are dangers associated with them. You must have normal skin sensation so you can determine if the pack is overheating. I have seen horrific burns that were caused by electric heating pads and microwave gel packs – both are prone to having hot spots. Heat should not be applied to an infected area.

Hot packs can be a therapeutic, relaxing treatments, but make sure they're warm, not hot.

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