

# Heat and Ice Treatments

Applying heat or ice is a common method for treating injuries, stiffness, swelling and pain. When used for fingers, hands and wrists, it can be very helpful for:

Recent injuries (bruises or fractures) or chronic injuries

- Swelling
- Stiffness
- Irritation

## Benefits of Heat

Heat or warmth will help get things moving by speeding up the molecules in tissues and increasing blood flow. Heat is helpful for stiff joints and muscles, and can be useful prior to an activity. We often see an athlete warming up before a workout.

A warm shower or bath can help sore, stiff joints, especially in the early morning. A warm compress or heating pad can also relieve stiffness (**Figure 1**); however, too much heat could cause fainting, swelling, or burns to skin and tissues, so use heat treatments with moderation.

## Benefits of Ice

If there is pain, swelling and irritation after an activity, ice can reduce these symptoms. Cold slows down the molecules in tissues and reduces blood flow.

The most common cold treatments are ice or something that has been made cold by placing it in the freezer, such as a gel pack (**Figure 2**). Apply ice for 15 minutes, then allow a 15-minute rest before reapplying.

As with heat, too much cold can slow down and stiffen sore joints, so use this treatment with moderation. Applying ice or anything extremely cold to bare skin can cause injury. Always wrap the source of cold in some sort of fabric. If a bandage or splint is too thick and the cold is not getting through, apply the cold near the area on exposed skin. Stop using ice if you feel extreme pain or numbness due to the cold.

## Special Treatments

Some special and more advanced heat/ice treatments may be used under the supervision of a therapist or physician. Some options may include:

- **Therapeutic ultrasound:** A qualified therapist will use ultrasound to slowly heat deeper tissues to help motion.



- **Contrast bath:** This is a bath that involves alternating heat and cold.
- **Paraffin or warm wax:** This can be used to apply heat via machines that are highly regulated and use a wax mixture that avoids skin burns.

Use caution when implementing a heat or ice treatment. Monitor time and the condition of your skin, and always test the hot or cold item before applying. Contact your physician or therapist for assistance.