

# Ice vs Heat Fact Sheet



Hastings Sports Injury &  
Physiotherapy Centre

EXCELLENCE DRIVEN. SUPERIOR RESULTS

## Ice vs Heat

Many people who come into the clinic often ask the question “when do I use ice vs heat?” It depends on the type of injury and how old the injury is.

### Ice

Ice is a vasoconstrictor meaning it contracts the blood vessels to limit bleeding and swelling.

Ice is used in the initial 48-72 hours following an acute soft tissue injury.

Such injuries could include but not limited to:

- Muscle tears
- Sprains & strains
- Bruises

Ice application is used to decrease bleeding, swelling, pain and disability and can improve recovery time.



It can also be used in more chronic conditions that have a tendency to become inflamed following treatment or exercise.

Ice should never be applied directly onto the skin. It should be wrapped in a pillowcase or cloth to reduce the risk of ice burn.

There are various ice regimes in the literature. One that has found to be effective is to ice the affected area for 20 minutes every hour. **20 minutes on, 40 minutes off.** For acute injuries this can be continued around the clock (generally whilst awake) for the first 2-3 days post injury.

### Heat

Heat is a vasodilator meaning it opens the blood vessels to allow for increased circulation. This is essential in the healing phase of the tissue as without blood to the damaged tissue the body cannot repair.



Heat therapy is beneficial for more chronic conditions such as osteoarthritis, postural pain, and injuries greater than three days old (or once inflammation has settled). Heat is also good to help ease tight muscles and stiff joints.

Heat can be applied in several forms from wheat packs, hot water bottles, hot showers or hot baths. Heat can be applied as often as required however it is important to take necessary measures not to burn the skin.

### Summary

**Ice** is for injuries 0-3 days old and for ongoing management of inflammation or swelling.

**Heat** is for injuries greater than three days old that are not inflamed, plus tight muscles and stiff joints.