

Education

Ice Therapy

Why is ice used for injuries?

Ice is used after an injury to reduce swelling and decrease pain. Ice decreases blood flow to the injured tissue and reduces inflammation.

When should I use ice?

Ice should be used for the first 2 to 3 days after an injury or until the swelling goes away. For instance, if you sprained your ankle 5 days ago and it is still swollen, you should continue to use ice.

How should I use ice?

You can make ice packs by placing ice cubes or crushed ice in a Ziploc-type plastic bag or you can use a commercial frozen gel pack. To avoid frostbite, do not put an ice pack directly on your skin. Instead, place the ice pack over a wet washcloth or towel. Use an elastic bandage to hold the ice pack in place. Ice packs should be used for 20 to 30 minutes every 3 to 4 hours.

To do ice massage, first freeze water in a paper or Styrofoam cup. Then tear away the top lip of the cup and rub the ice over the injured area for 5 to 10 minutes. Ice massage works very well for overuse injuries.

When you first apply ice, you will feel coldness, then burning. Then, after several minutes, the area will become numb.

Can there be any harmful effects from ice therapy?

If ice packs are put directly on the skin and left too long, frostbite may occur. The skin and tissue underneath (muscles, nerves, and fat) may be injured, either temporarily or permanently. Certain parts of the body (including the elbow, the knee, and the foot) can be injured by cold more easily because they don't have as much padding or insulation.

If you have nerve, vascular, or skin problems ask your health care provider if you should use ice packs.

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