

PATIENT GUIDE TO ICE TECHNIQUES

EDWARD G. MCFARLAND, MD
ANDREW J. COSGAREA, MD
BRIAN J. KRABAK, MD
Johns Hopkins Sports Medicine

The application of ice or cold to an injury or an area after surgery has been shown to decrease pain and to help prevent swelling. Sports medicine specialists now recommend that ice be used not for just 24 or 48 hours after an injury or after surgery, but ice is now recommended instead of heat for the relief of pain and swelling due to many causes.

There are basically two ways to apply ice to an area, and these are known as ice massage and ice bags/packs. Ice massage is when the injured area is rubbed with the ice directly, using either ice cubes or paper cups filled with water and frozen in the refrigerator. Ice packs can be made with cubed or crushed ice in a plastic bag, or a bag of frozen peas can be used. Other forms of ice packs include gel packs or other devices available in the store.

WHEN TO USE ICE:

Generally ice can be applied to any bruise, sprain of a ligament (such as an ankle or knee sprain or jammed finger) or any injury that begins to swell. It also can be used for arthritic joints that hurt or are swollen. Ice can be used after surgery to the spine, joints or extremities. It also can be used to decrease the pain of a stiff joint during physical therapy.

HOW TO APPLY ICE:

Ice generally should not be applied directly to the skin, and it is recommended that a wash cloth be placed between the skin and the ice pack. If you chose to not cover the skin then the ice should not be left on as long since it can freeze the skin and result in frostbite. The ice pack should be left on for fifteen or twenty minutes at a time. Ice can be applied to an area as often as every two hours. The more severe the pain and the swelling, then the more often ice can be applied. Ice can be used for many days in a row or until the pain and swelling go away. Ice can be used any time after an injury and should not be stopped 48 hours after an injury or surgery.

HOW TO PERFORM ICE MASSAGE:

Ice massage is performed by rubbing the injured area with an ice cube or cup of ice for ten to fifteen minutes or until the skin is slightly numb. An ice cup is made by putting paper cups of water in the freezer until the water freezes. When ready to use the paper cup is peeled away enough to expose the ice, and the cup is held while icing the involved area. This type of icing is typically used for very small areas of inflammation, such as for tennis elbow or a localized inflammation of the patellar or Achilles tendon. Ice massage can be performed as often as every two hours and can be used until the pain and swelling go away.

WHO SHOULD NOT USE ICE?

If there is any question about whether you can use ice or not, you should ask your doctor. Ice should not be used in areas of skin where sensation is not normal, such in paraplegia , diabetes or neuropathy. This type of skin does not have protective sensation and the skin can be easily frozen. Skin without normal blood supply due to injury, vascular disease or surgery should not have ice since ice may further decrease the blood flow and damage the area. Rarely individuals are allergic to ice and get hives from the ice. If there is any doubt then contact your physician.

WHAT SIGNS ARE THERE IF ICE IS APPLIED TOO LONG?

Ice can make the area white but the blood or pinkness of the area should return within a few minutes after removing the ice. Ice can also make the area beneath is a little numb, but there should be no tingling or numbness beyond the area being iced. If this should occur then the ice is freezing nerves and should be stopped. Increasing pain despite ice and pain medication could be serious and if there is any doubt contact your physician.

MY DOCTOR GAVE ME A CONTINUOUS ICE DEVICE - HOW SHOULD I USE IT?

Continuous ice devices usually do not get as cold as a regular ice pack and as result can be left on the area for longer periods of time than an ice pack. These devices should have something between the device and the skin to prevent injury to the skin. If there is any question about how to use the device then contact the physician. Most of these devices come with printed instruction which should be consulted.

WHAT ABOUT COLD SPRAY OR BALMS THAT PROMOTE COLD?

These techniques to produce cold are generally not as good as ice bags or ice massage to produce cold. Usually the cold produced is of short duration, can be expensive and cannot be used every few hours. If you chose to use these then read the instructions very carefully prior to use.