



## ICE OR HEAT? WHAT TO USE FOR PAIN AND INJURIES

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Q&A with Tim Keeley – Principal Physiotherapist >> [View profile](#)

**Q: What should I use if I just suffered an injury?**



A: Acute Injuries: R.I.C.E for 24-72 hours. When you first suffer an injury, where there is tissue damage, acute pain and swelling, always use ICE, (*not* heat). During the onset of injury, the body swells the area quickly to immobilise the damaged area so it can repair (and stop you using it!). They may also be bleeding if the injury is to muscle and ligament and

tendon. The body tends to go a little overboard most of the time and the swelling is excessive. The more tissue damage - the more the swelling and bleeding. The best way to limit the amount (and therefore improve your rehab time) is to apply the R.I.C.E. principle as soon as possible. R.I.C.E. stands for Rest, Ice, Compression and Elevation and is still the best form of controlling post-injury swelling. The ice rapidly cools and contracts the tissues, which markedly slows the blood flow and swelling in the area. The compression part is essential in combination with the ice to help compress the tissues, even the pressure in the area and prevent the swelling expanding. Think of holding a cut on your finger tight, it stops the bleeding and swelling. Always combine ice and compression by using a tubigrip compression stocking or compression support over the ice. If you used heat in this instance like a hot pack or hot shower, this will expand the tissues, increase the blood flow and increase bleeding and swelling in the area, which is not what you want! The same applies for Massage. Do not get an injured area massaged in the first 24-48 hours as this will also do the same as what heat does.

Apply the ice for at least 25-30 minutes at a time and repeat every 2-3 hours for 24-72 hours or as directed by your Physio. Do not leave the ice on for more than 45mins at a time.

**Q: It's been a few days since my injury, and the pain is less. Can I use heat now?**

A: Yes. However the best way to do this is use heat AND ice alternately. When you go from ice to heat then back again, it helps 'flush' the tissues and remove waste products from the injury and promote healing. Think of squeezing a sponge and letting it fill up with water, then squeezing it again and repeating this process. Professional athletes use this idea to help improve their recovery rate. After the 72 hours, the swelling and bleeding process as stopped, so you won't increase the damage with heat. Using ice and heat can be very time consuming so not many people (apart from professional athletes) get the time to do this effectively.

Apply the ice as above. Wait until the tissues warm up to normal body temperature. Then apply the heat for the same amount of time. Let the tissues cool down naturally. Then repeat the process as many times as you can.

**Q: I have pain after exercising, from an old injury. What should I use then?**

A: As tempting as heat is, again the best is ICE in this instance, not heat. If you suffer recurrent pain after exercising, this is usually a sign of inflammation and aggravation of the tissues. As much as heat eases the pain, ice is still the better option. This is because the ice will de-sensitise the area and reduce the pain, but also help the body in the reduction and slowing of the inflammation process. Apply the ice for at least 25-30 minutes at a time and repeat every 2-3 hours as able.

**Q: I have pain and muscle spasm in my neck, shoulders, and a headache. Is heat the best?**



A: In this case, heat in the form of a wheat bag or a microwavable hot pack are the best option as it increases the blood flow to the area, helping reduce tight muscles and active trigger points in the muscles in the neck, traps and spine. The hot shower option (which many of us are familiar with) is also very relieving. The same applies for the lower back and mid back (thoracic). Using heat these areas helps soothe muscle pain and neural tension in the spine and relaxes muscle spasm and tightness. Massage Therapists use hot stones on the back and spinal muscles for this very reason. Massage therapy works the same as heat, so if you can get to a Massage Therapist or Physio you will get even better relieve (and the problem addressed as well).

**Q: I get really tight muscles in my legs and lower back from time to time. Should I use heat before I train or play sport?**

A: If you do a proper warm up, heat is not usually necessary as the blood flow and neural activity generated by the active warm up does the trick. However for very tight muscles or problem areas (from old injuries) that need extra warming up, heat is the best option here as the goal is to reduce the muscle tension and increase your blood flow so the tissues are more easily stretched. You don't want to stretch cold muscles before exercise. Apply the heat pack or wheat bag for 25-30mins before the active warm up then make sure you stretch the tight muscles. Using only heat before training is a 'passive' warm up and not as effective as an 'active' warm up. However, doing a passive warm up of heat and massage, then an active warm up or a light jog or bike before stretching is the most effective before training or sport. This is the principle that professional sports-people use before their games. Heat, Massage, Warm-up, Stretch, perform!

To shop online for affordable and reliable ice packs, heat packs and wheat bags go to our Physio shop at:  
[www.physiofitness.com.au/physio-shop.htm](http://www.physiofitness.com.au/physio-shop.htm)