

Heat/Cold Applications

There are specific reasons to use heat or cold. Sometimes the decision to use heat or cold is a personal preference. The following guidelines will help you choose what is most appropriate for your condition.

Heat

When to use heat

- To reduce pain and stiffness
- To relax muscles
- To increase flexibility of muscles
- Before exercise or activity

Application time

- 20 to 30 minutes

Cold

When to use cold

- The first 24 hours after an injury or flare up.
It is OK to use cold for several days if pain or swelling continues.
- To decrease swelling
- To reduce pain
- To relax muscle spasms
- After exercise or activity

Application time

- 10 to 20 minutes (longer can cause skin damage.)

Precautions

- Never apply heat or ice directly to the skin; cover area with cloth or towel.
- Check skin during treatment; skin should appear pink or light red with heat or ice application. White blotches or bright red color indicate tissue damage.

Do not use heat with the following conditions:

- Acute inflammatory conditions
- Cancer/malignancies
- Regenerating peripheral nerves
- Bleeding conditions

Do not use heat or cold applications with the following conditions:

- Decreased sensation to temperature
- Skin infections
- Recent large wound, burn or surgical site
- Any area desensitized from radiation or cobalt treatment
- Persons with confusion or inability to communicate
- Cardiovascular conditions such as:
 - Raynaud's phenomenon
 - Vasculitis
 - Peripheral vascular disease
 - Cardiac insufficiency