

Ice Therapy - When and How to Use It

You just hurt your back (ankle, knee, shoulder or elbow, etc.) and are wondering what to use - heat or cold. The best rule of thumb for a recent injury, known as the acute stage of care, is to apply cold in the form of ice. In this phase, the injured area will likely feel warm, swollen, painful to contact or with movement, and has developed a localized muscle spasm. This initial phase will only last about 24 to 48 hours when ice therapy is immediately applied to reduce inflammation and allow healing to progress. For maximum benefit, ice needs to be applied at least five times over a 24-hour period, with at least one hour in between for circulation to return before starting the next ice treatment.

Sensations of Ice Therapy

If the area in question is allowed to become cold enough, you will feel a numbing or analgesic effect. This is the ultimate goal of ice therapy. The normal sequence of sensations with ice therapy are as follows: initially the ice will feel cold, then you'll feel burning (like the area is on fire), followed by aching (which lasts only about a minute) and finally numbness (where you can't feel the ice any more).

Size of Body Area	Sample Area	Length of Ice Application in Minutes
Small	Hands, Feet, Elbow	5 Minutes
Medium	Neck, Shoulder, Knee, Leg	10 Minutes
Large	Low Back, Buttock	15 to 20 Minutes

Staying within these general time lines is a safe bet. The old saying, "a little is good, therefore a lot is better" does not apply here, If ice is left on too long, it will produce increased swelling and make the condition worse. After the acute phase has passed, the other phases of healing can proceed. Unfortunately, I have seen patients 12 months post-injury who still have swelling, heat and local muscle spasm because they forgot to apply ice and take the injury through the acute phase of care.