

Headaches: Cold masks or wraps over the forehead, eyes and temples help the throbbing pain of a migraine. Ice is preferred, but heat wraps can halt neck spasms that contribute to headache.

Arthritis: Heat wins for arthritis and injuries that linger more than six weeks. Patients with more chronic osteoarthritis usually feel better with heat. But for acute gout flares, try ice.

You can apply ice and heat in lots of ways. Our experts generally recommend up to 20 minutes on and 20 minutes off:

Ice packs: Frozen peas or corn, ice cubes in a baggie or frozen gel pack. You can ice beyond 48 hours, until swelling, tenderness or inflammation are gone.

Ice massage: Freeze water in a Dixie cup, peel back the top, and massage the tender area until it's numb. (Best for targeted icing after injury or for areas too awkward for ice packs, like the elbow or heel).

Cold masks: Place a cold mask, available at drugstores, over your eyes or lay a towel soaked in cold water over your forehead and temples.

Moist heat: Enjoy a bath, shower, hot tub or whirlpool using warm, not hot, water (92-100°).

Heat wraps: Drape a heat wrap, available at drugstores, around your neck like a scarf (great for work or travel).

Heating pads: To avoid burns, remove heating pads if the area becomes uncomfortably warm.

When to use caution

Paraffin wax treatments supply moist heat but overheating can cause burns. (Treatments are labor-intensive and supplies are pricey, too.)

Use caution on areas with decreased sensation if you have neuropathy (from diabetes or another condition) or Raynaud's syndrome. Extreme temperatures can damage skin.

Wonder if it's safe to use ice when you're burning up with fever? There's nothing wrong with using cold to bring down a fever.

Cleveland Clinic Canada's Sports Health Program is designed to help you recover from injury and perform at your best. Our comprehensive program is organized to meet the medical, nutritional and fitness needs of recreational athletes as well as individuals who experience muscle and joint pain. Our multidisciplinary team includes sports medicine physicians (covered by OHIP), orthopaedic surgeons (OHIP), physiotherapists, chiropractors, manual osteopathic practitioners, registered massage therapists and sports dietitians.

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