

Heat vs Ice

A reusable gel pack: chilled in the freezer it eases swelling and bruising in the first week or two; warmed in hot water it loosens stiff joints and tendons later in recovery.

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After an injury or operation, “should I use heat or ice?” is one of the most common questions we get asked. The short answer is *ice for swelling, heat for stiffness* – but the timing matters more than the choice.

Ice – for the first few days

Ice is most useful in the first 48 to 72 hours after a fresh injury or after surgery. It works by narrowing the blood vessels under the skin, which slows the inflammatory response and reduces swelling and pain.

How to use it well:

- 15 to 20 minutes at a time, no longer
- Always wrap the ice pack in a tea towel – never put ice directly on skin
- Three or four times a day is fine; more often is rarely useful
- Stop if the skin goes numb, white, or bright red

A bag of frozen peas wrapped in a towel works as well as any purpose-bought ice pack. Cheap and reusable.

Heat – once the swelling has settled

Heat helps stiff, aching muscles and joints, but it makes *acute* swelling worse. Wait until the early swelling is gone (usually a week or two after surgery, longer for some injuries) before switching from ice to heat.

How to use it well:

- A wheat bag heated in the microwave, a hot water bottle, or a warm shower all work well
- 20 minutes at a time
- Don't sleep with a hot pack on – burns happen when the skin is pressed against a heat source for hours

Heat is especially helpful before exercises or physiotherapy sessions – it loosens stiff tissue so you can stretch further with less discomfort.

When neither helps

If your pain is getting worse rather than better, or if the limb is red, hot, increasingly swollen, or starting to look different from the other side, that's not a heat-or-ice question – it's a phone call to your treating clinician.

Quick rule of thumb

Stage	What it feels like	Use
First 2-3 days	Throbbing, tight, swollen	Ice
Week 1-2	Settling but stiff	Either, follow your therapist's lead
Week 2 onwards	Stiff but not swollen	Heat before exercises, ice after if sore
Anytime	Sharp pain that wasn't there before	Phone, not packs