

When it comes to healing an injury is it better to use ice or heat?

The purpose of using either ice or heat is to increase blood flow to the injury and bring in healing 'cells' to the injured area to speed up healing. Heat works by stimulating sensors in blood vessels that open them up to increase blood flow. If you apply heat for 30 minutes, it takes a few minutes for the sensors to respond. As soon as you remove the heat, your treatment is over. In addition, heat may damage the already damaged blood vessel walls by increasing swelling.

When cold is applied, on the other hand, it takes a few minutes for it to affect the blood vessel's sensors by again increasing blood flow. You know this happens because when you remove the ice, what color is your skin? Red - a sure sign that blood is indeed rushing into the area. When you remove the ice it takes a substantial amount of time for the sensors to return to normal, so for a 20-minute ice application, you might get 40 minutes worth of treatment. In addition, cold does not damage the blood vessel walls and therefore does not increase swelling. Therefore more and more experts recommend ice as the treatment of choice for immediate care of an injury. Apply for approximately 20 minutes, 3 times per day.

So when, if ever, should you place heat on an injury? While you may have heard that switching to heat about 48 hours after you've been injured will improve range of motion and ease the pain, experts say this isn't so. Ice is still a better choice because of longer increased blood flow per treatment time and reduced risk of swelling. Get more range of motion by moving the joint - not heating it. Besides, if the offending area is inflamed, heating it up could actually delay healing.

- Neal Pire (Source: Lewis Maharam, MD, FACSM, Medical Director of the New York Road Runners and New York City Marathon).

All sports massage sessions include 20 minutes of cold therapy or heat therapy if desired as long as it's not contraindicated.