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YOUR HEALTH & FITNESS



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Fire and ice—using heat and cold for muscle soreness

BY DR. JULIE T. CHEN, M.D.

I am always hearing about different ways to deal with pain after my workouts either indoors or outdoors, but I'm not sure when to ice and when to heat for my muscle soreness. How should I tackle regular muscle soreness and tightness from home?

THAT is a great question. Many people think it is straightforward but the answer can be tricky. In different situations, sometimes heat is warranted and sometimes ice is warranted. Let's get started on clarifying this issue.

If you have tight muscles from exercise but you didn't strain a muscle—meaning it feels tight but range of motion is normal and there's no significant pain—then heat will help increase blood flow to your muscles and help loosen up the tissue.

If you have pain and there's limited range of motion because you strained or sprained your tissue, you need to ice at least 24 to 48 hours after the start of the symptoms. Afterwards, if range of motion has been restored and you feel very little discomfort, you can consider heating.

If it is a tendon or a joint issue, you should ice the joint or tendon throughout the duration of the discomfort or injury.

If you are having significant discomfort or limitation in movement, you should see your doctor for an evaluation. If you cannot stand on it or bear weight on it or if you can't lift the limb or body part, you should definitely see your doctor. They may refer you for a potential imaging evaluation of the body part to see if anything is broken or torn.

The takeaway is that if you are at all uncertain, have your doctor take a look. Time

is of the essence when it comes to initial breaks or tearing of bone and tissue. You don't want to wait too long.

Make sure you are icing or heating over your clothing or a cloth so you don't injure your skin. Also, do not ice or heat for more than 15 to 20 minutes at a time. You can definitely repeat the therapy multiple times per day, but make sure to give your skin over the injured area a break from the heat or ice so you don't incur any skin damage.

In regards to both inflammation and pain, there are some herbs that might help. These options are to be used only if you are not already taking over-the-counter pain medications or prescription medications. If you are interested in herbal options, consider ginger, turmeric, arnica, fish oil, and rosemary, to name just a few. It is important to clear any and all supplements or herbs with your physician before you use them. Even though they are in general less likely to cause side effects, you need to clear them with your physician to make sure you don't have any health issues or other medications or herbs that may interact or cause any adverse reactions.

Another quick tip is to use ginger topically over the strained or sprained area to help with inflammation, as long as you are not allergic or sensitive to ginger. I usually recommend patients blend the ginger after softening it in warm water and use it as a



poultice with cheese-cloth, or something similar, over the inflamed or swollen area. Having said that, if there is a part of your body that is inflamed or swollen, you should err on the side of having your physician examine you. If it's nothing but a simple sprain or strain and nothing else is to be done except letting it heal, then you can consider trying the ginger poultice over the inflamed area.

Keeping prevention in mind, if you warm up and stretch your muscles before your workout, your level of risk for injury is much lower. Remember these tips and I hope the only thing you need to think about is how much farther you want to bike or run next time out, instead of worrying about how to heal your injuries. Happy trails! 🚴

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