

Heat and Cold for Management of Hand Pain or Stiffness

This leaflet explains more about application of heat or cold to a hand or wrist, including the benefits, risks and any alternatives. If you have any questions, please speak to the therapist caring for you.

Why should I apply heat or cold?

Used in the right way, heat can help reduce pain and stiffness in joints and muscles. Cold application can help reduce joint inflammation and swelling.

Do not apply heat or cold to any part of your hand or arm where you have reduced sensation, such as numbness, or pins and needles.

Instructions for applying heat

You should apply heat to stiff joints, or to relax muscles before exercise. The heat allows you to stretch the soft tissue more. This may help you to move further.

Different ways heat can be applied

- Warm water soak. Put your arm as far up as required, in a bowl of comfortably-warm water for up to 15 minutes. You can also do any exercises in the water.
- Hot water bottle (see below).
- Heat packs.
- Paraffin wax baths (these can be bought online). A thin layer of warm wax is applied around the hand or wrist by dipping your hand in and repeating.

How to use heat

- Always check the heat source is not too hot, so you do not burn your skin.
- If using a hot water bottle or a heat pack, use a towel to protect the skin from the heat source.
- Apply a couple of times each day (or when needed), for up to 15 minutes.

When to use heat

- When the joint is stiff.
- Before exercise if you think it might help.
- If it helps reduce your pain.

Potential problems and precautions

- Remember not to use heat if you have reduced sensation.
- Heat can sometimes result in increased pain through inflammation of the joints and swelling of soft tissue. If this happens, do not use heat again.

Instructions for applying cold

You can apply ice, or towels soaked with cold water (cold compress) to swollen joints or inflamed tissue.

Ice can be applied in the following ways

- Using a commercial ice gel pack kept in the freezer.
- Using a plastic bag filled with something frozen, such as crushed ice, ice cubes, peas.

How to use them

- Never apply ice or a cold compress directly on to your skin. Always have a damp cloth between the cold source and your skin.
- The cold pack should be flexible to mould around the area affected, finger, hand wrist or forearm.
- Test the area for a minute and, if you can, use up to 10 minutes maximum. Keep the ice pack moving and check your skin every few minutes. Avoid any redness.
- Apply a couple of times a day.

When to use them

- When the joint is inflamed or the soft tissue is swollen.
- After exercise, if your joints tend to become inflamed.
- After activity, if swelling is present.
- If it helps to reduce your pain.

Potential problems and precautions

- Never apply to an area of numbness.
- Never apply if you have impaired circulation.
- An ice burn is possible if a cold source is left on the skin for too long.

If you require any advice, please contact the hand therapy team on (01392) 402429 (Plastic Surgery) or (01392) 403522 (Rheumatology / Orthopaedics).

The Trust cannot accept any responsibility for the accuracy of the information given if the leaflet is not used by RD&E staff undertaking procedures at the RD&E hospitals.

© Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust

Designed by Graphics (Print & Design), RD&E