

OPINION COLUMN

Hot or cold treatments key to healing process

Melissa Carr, 24 hours
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As the summer sun shines on the city, Vancouverites are outside en masse enjoying outdoor activities. Some are enjoying it more than others though. Volleyball, soccer, softball, golfing, swimming, running, kayaking, hiking, biking, gardening, and even going for a leisurely stroll, can all be activities that need to be passed by when pain strikes.

Pain is important as it usually indicates when a movement or position is a bad idea because it may worsen the injury. Something as simple as hot or cold applications can often help manage and reduce such pains.

If an injury is acute — within the first few days —and warm to touch, tender, red, and/or swollen, ice it. Ice will help to take down some of the inflammation. It can also be used to temporarily help relieve painful swelling due to chronic pains such as tendonitis, arthritis, and plantar fasciitis (note that the 'itis' endings signify inflammation). Ice can also be applied to a chronically painful tissue after it has been aggravated, such as to tennis elbow after a spirited match.

To ice an injury, your best bet is to get a proper ice pack that conforms to the part being iced. In a pinch, however, you can also use a bag of frozen vegetables or just ice cubes. Make sure that whatever you use, do not apply it directly to your skin without a thin cloth in between. Leave the ice on for 10 minutes at a time, several times a day for an acute injury.

If the pain is chronic, due to muscle tightness or spasm, and there is not visible inflammation, heat is commonly recommended. Cold contracts, heat expands. Heat helps to bring more blood flow to an area and relaxes tight muscles. Heat is not generally recommended right after vigorous activity, but it can be used before to loosen up muscles and improve circulation.

Heat can be applied using a hot wet towel, heating pads, hot water bottle or athletic hot packs. Be careful not to burn the skin and never leave heat on for more than 20 minutes at a time.

Acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine have centuries of practice in treating injuries and pain. A qualified professional can assess the best form of treatment, including advising whether heat or cold is best for each pain.

Melissa Carr is a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine, caring for patients in an integrative medicine clinic in Vancouver.

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