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WHAT DO I DO NOW?

The following information is to be used as a general guideline to assist your decision making skills when you have experienced a neuromusculoskeletal injury (sprain/strain).

If you have been diagnosed with diabetes or cardiovascular disease, first discuss with your health care provider which therapies are safe for you to use.

If you have any questions about your health, always contact one of your health care providers.

ACUTE (NEW INJURY)

Ice is used during the first 24-72 hours of a new injury or an exacerbation (flare up) of an old injury. With severe injuries, ice may be needed for several weeks. The general guideline is to ice the involved area for 20 minutes, then waiting a minimum of 60 minutes before reapplying the ice. Ice can be used several times throughout the day and night if you following these guidelines.

You should experience the 4 stages of cold therapy (cryotherapy):

1. Cold
2. Burning
3. Aching
4. Numbness

It is important to get to the numb stage (generally 20 minutes for most adults). The primary physiological function of ice is to decrease inflammation, swelling, and pain.

(Note: It is best not to use ice packs that are designed for food. These are much too cold for our tissues and we can actually get quite a skin burn. Always take precautions in using insulation between you and your ice pack.)

SUBACUTE

Heat is used with **ice** for **contrast therapy** once a significant amount of inflammation and swelling has decreased. This can begin anywhere from the third day of an injury, or as long as 3-4 weeks depending on the severity of the injury. The general guideline for contrast therapy is to begin with 10 minutes of moist heat, followed by 10 minutes of ice, followed by 10 minutes of moist heat. The total length of time can vary (30, 40, 50, 60 minutes) being sure to begin and end with heat.

(Note: Preferably, the heat source should be moist heat so it can penetrate the tissues more effectively; i.e. hot shower, hot tub, moisture producing heat pack, hot water bottle.)

CHRONIC

Heat will then be used alone for more chronic conditions where the primary symptoms are stiffness and achiness (much different from pain and soreness). Heat then would be applied 10-20 minutes at a time, remembering to use moist heat.

Massage is beneficial in a similar way that heat is. They both produce increased circulation, which is beneficial in bringing nutrients into the healing tissue and carrying waste product away. Massage is utilized at many different stages of healing to soften and relax the soft tissues that have been contracted while protecting your injured joints. If your condition is not getting better by massage alone, you probably need further evaluation by one of your health care providers.

ARE YOU STILL UNSURE?

As a guideline, if your symptoms increase or do not improve, your injury may be more involved than you thought. Also, you may have chosen the incorrect therapy, it may have been too soon to advance to the next phase, or you may have injured yourself again without being aware of it. You can then always use the next appropriate therapy depending on what outcome you are trying to achieve. Of course, if you have any questions or concerns, call one of your health care providers.

HELPING YOUR SPINE

Posture in general should always support the neutral positions of your spine and extremities. For example, your head should be looking straight, not bent or turned to one side or the other for long periods of time; your low back supported to maintain your lumbar curve and to keep your posture upright (this also allows more room for your lungs which will allow for more oxygen); shoulders relaxed; stand straight with your stomach muscles gently contracted. Much of good posture is awareness and common sense.

Exercise, which promotes movement of any kind, is very beneficial. We are all at different fitness levels, so choose an exercise that you want to do and can do. General guidelines are to warm up before beginning any strenuous exercise; cool down afterward. If you are exercising with pain or discomfort, this could be a warning sign that something is wrong and needs attention. Remember, when our joints are injured, they send neurological messages to the muscles to tighten, and they also send pain messages to us to tell us that something is wrong. This is one of our body's protective mechanisms.