REMEMBER I.C.E. METHOD FOR FIRST 72 HOURS AFTER AN INJURY

When is the right time to use heat or cold following an injury? These guidelines will help you make the right choice.

Immediately following an injury, remember the word I.C.E. This stands for Ice, Compression and Elevation. This is to control pain and swelling.

Use ice, not heat, for at least the first 72 hours after the injury. Ice may be uncomfortable during the first 5 minutes, but pain, swelling and muscle spasm will be decreased. If you apply heat too soon, swelling and stiffness will increase.

Crushed ice is best because it can conform to the injured area. You can make reusable crushed ice. Mix approximately two cups of water and one cup of rubbing alcohol in a securely sealed freezer bag and keep in the freezer. This mixture will freeze like slush and can then be applied to the injured area. Commercial gel packs are available that can be used for both heat and cold.

Heat is used to decrease pain and joint stiffness, increase blood flow and promote tissue healing. After the initial stage of the injury is over, you can choose either ice or heat for pain relief and to control muscle spasms. Use whichever you feel helps you the most.

Common forms of heat available at home include heating pads, hot-water bottles and moist-heat packs. Dry heat brings a higher skin temperature and moist heat penetrates the tissues slightly more. The choice between moist and dry is up to you depending on what you have available.

In some situations, heat or cold treatments should not be used. Some people have an allergic reaction to cold. And cold or heat should not be used on areas where circulation or sensation is decreased.

Treatment time for both heat and ice is usually 15 to 30 minutes. When using heat treatments, follow the directions carefully to avoid skin burns. When applying ice, wrap a moist towel around the ice and secure it to the area being treated. If you need help in deciding whether to use heat or cold treatment, check with your health-care provider.