



Cool It or Heat It?

Soft Tissue Injuries

Time and time again patients ask whether they should apply heat or ice to muscular aches and pains and how to best manage their injuries. It's not uncommon to receive conflicting advice from different healthcare practitioners. Hopefully this Chinese Medicine approach may help you recover from injuries and help you get back into your regular exercise routine.

Acute Injuries

Soft tissue injuries are where a bruise, strain or tear occurs in a muscle, tendon or ligament. Acute injuries are recent injuries; they will manifest immediately or within a matter of hours after an incident.

RICE

I am sure you have all heard of the **Rest, Ice, Compression, Elevation (RICE)** treatment. Whether you are talking of Eastern or Western medicine, applying the RICE treatment is the best thing to do as quickly as you can. **Rest** will prevent any further damage of an injury. Applying **ice**, a **compression** bandage and gently **elevating** the damaged limb will help prevent swelling, pain and leakage of blood from the vessels (bruising). Apply ice in a pack or covered in a thin cloth, for 20 minutes on and 20 minutes off the injury. RICE is appropriate for about two to three hours after the injury.

Chinese Medicine's Take

Six hours or so after a soft tissue injury has occurred Chinese Medicine takes a different approach than Western medicine for treatment. According to Chinese Medicine, after six hours of RICE, it is important to promote the flow of blood and Qi (energy) through the injury to ensure a fast recovery. Using ice beyond 6 hours might help with pain management but it will produce more stagnation and prevent blood flow - you would not be doing yourself any favours.

The easiest way to promote blood flow and Qi is to apply gentle heat to the area; this can be done with water, a heat pack or by applying a Chinese herbal liniment (only if the skin is NOT broken). Liniments come in liquids, creams or gels and contain Chinese herbs.

Using a liniment will not only decrease recovery time but will also help with pain management.

Better known liniments are brands such as *Tiger Balm*, *PoSum Oil* and *Kwang Long Oil*; these are available through the clinic and also through Chinese herbal stores or your local health food shop.

An Old Home Remedy

A more available treatment than liniment, but also effective, is apple cider vinegar. Apple cider vinegar is best applied before bed because you will not be moving as much.

To apply, dampen a cloth with vinegar (careful to not soak it), then wrap the cloth around the affected area, cover this with a piece of glad wrap then off to sleep. Not only will you feel better but have much less visible bruising on the skin the next day.

Chronic Injuries

Longer term injuries or chronic pain - for example, in the lower back or shoulder - can also greatly benefit from applying liniments. If the injury is at least five days old, gentle massage can be used in combination with a liniment to help recovery. If strenuous deep massage is done too early it can cause more bleeding, which will actually worsen the original injury. If the injury is a few weeks old or is reoccurring, deep pressure massage and mobilisation in combination with acupuncture can provide great pain relief and speed up recovery.