

Home treatment for pain relief: heated pads and cold packs

1

Taking an active part in your treatment will help you to feel in control of your arthritis. There are several products that people with arthritis can use in the home to help reduce pain and stiffness. The simplest of these are heated pads and cold packs.

Heated pads and cold packs can be an easy, effective and inexpensive way to manage pain. However, these treatments can have serious side effects if not used properly.

How to use cold packs to relieve pain

Cold packs are used to reduce swelling and can be used along with heat to aid your recovery as swelling begins to subside. It is important to remember that cold packs should not be applied for more than 10 to 20 minutes at a time (do not apply again for at least another hour).

Cold packs should be wrapped in a towel or tea-towel. Never put them directly on your skin. If you do not like cold, try using a warm wet towel to lessen the shock of applying the pack.

If cold packs are applied correctly, the skin in that area will become reddened. This is a normal response. However, if blotchy white spots appear in the red area after removing the cold pack, that indicates that the area has been cooled excessively and is a warning sign to reduce the amount of time the cold pack is left on.

How NOT to use cold packs to relieve pain

You must not put cold packs on your neck as this can cause you to faint. If you have poor circulation or conditions such as Raynaud's disease, lupus, scleroderma, peripheral vascular disease (PVD) or Buerger's disease, you should not use cold packs at all. Do not apply cold packs without letting the skin warm up again. Cold packs will freeze the area and that will decrease circulation to the swollen area, which could damage the nerves.

If you have poor circulation, high blood pressure, a heart condition or an area where there is nerve damage, then please consult your doctor before starting treatment as using cold packs may be inappropriate. They should not be used if you have any numbness around a painful joint or in the limb. Contact your doctor or rheumatology department if you experience this.

Where to get cold packs

You can buy reusable cold packs from your local chemist, sports shops and some supermarkets.

A reasonable and cheap way to make a cold pack is to use a packet of frozen peas. You can reuse the same packet numerous times, but be sure to mark the packet with a permanent marker and never eat the contents as the peas will spoil.

Home treatment for pain relief: heated pads and cold packs

2

How to use heated pads for pain relief

Heat should be used with care and 'warmth' is often a more appropriate description of the heat level required. Hot packs must be wrapped in a towel. Heat increases the blood circulation and can help relieve sore, stiff muscles and joints, especially in the morning and at bedtime. Heat sources can include everyday things like a hot bath or shower, a hot water bottle, or wrapping the affected area(s) in warm material. Moist heat from wheat bags is more effective than dry heat from electric pads or lamps.

How NOT to use heat packs to relieve pain

Heat packs should not be used on a joint or area of skin that is very inflamed or in the first 48-72 hours after an injury. Heat applied for long periods, for example, sleeping on a heated pad or electric blanket, can cause the nervous system to have a reflex response known as 'rebound', which causes the muscles and joints to become stiff and sore. Heated pads even used at a very low heat can lead to burns. Heat should only be applied for 20-30 minutes at a time.

You must not use an analgesic cream at the same time as a heated pad or any other heat source, as the creams themselves generate 'heat' and this is a quick way to give yourself a burn. If you have used a cream, then you should wait an hour or so before you use heat. They should not be used if you have any numbness around a painful joint or in the limb.

Where to get heated pads

Heated pads are normally either gel-filled or wheat-filled and are microwavable. Some pads can be moulded to fit the affected part of the body. Larger pads can be used to relieve back or neck pain. There are also very small pads suitable for small areas like finger joints.

Electrically heated pads come with a wide variety of features, including thermostatic controls and massage mode. Electrically heated pads can either be mains or battery powered. A homemade heated pad can be fashioned from rice and a clean natural-fibre sock. The sock has to be a natural fibre such as wool because artificial fibres are easily destroyed by microwaves. Fill the sock with pudding rice and sew the opening up to seal the rice into the sock. Heat the sock for 2-3 minutes in a microwave, but remember not to get the rice wet, because it will cook.

Can paraffin wax baths help?

Paraffin wax baths are sometimes used by physiotherapists, but domestic models are also available. Wax baths can be used as a soothing source of heat, especially for painful hands, but should not be used if the skin is broken or if you have psoriasis. As with all heat treatments, extreme care should be taken and your doctor or physiotherapist should be consulted to assess your individual needs. They should not be used if you have any numbness around a painful joint or in the limb.

Companies selling paraffin wax baths are listed below. Please note, inclusion on this

Home treatment for pain relief: heated pads and cold packs

3

list does not imply a recommendation by Arthritis Care and neither is the list comprehensive. This list is provided for ease of reference only (details correct at time of going to print).

Argos Direct

Acton Gate,
Stafford,
ST18 9AR

Tel: 0845 640 2020

www.argos.co.uk

Argos offer a paraffin wax bath (ref: 443/5736) for £40.99.

Beauty Express

Unit 7b, Evanton Drive,
Thornliebank Industrial Estate
Glasgow G46 8HL

Tel: 0845 702 3803

Email: sales@beautyexpress.co.uk

www.beautyexpress.co.uk

Mid-Therm Paraffin Wax Bath (ref: PN1336) for £49.99.

Spalight

Spalight Ltd

Harrow

Middlesex HA2 7HJ

Tel: 0208 868 4080

www.spalightltd.co.uk

Paraffin Wax Bath (ref: HWAX02W) for £37.00 + £10 p&p

Other sources of heat

Other useful sources of heat can be found in thermal clothing and fleece lined footwear, and electrically heated gloves. These are especially useful for people with Raynaud's disease.

Other organisations

The Raynaud's Association

See the website for a mail order brochure.

www.raynauds.org.uk

Home treatment for pain relief: heated pads and cold packs

4

Where can I get more information and support?

Arthritis Care is the UK's largest charity working with and for all people who have arthritis.

We are here to help you make positive choices through our information, website, self-management training, and professional helpline. Call the free helpline for confidential support on 0808 800 4050 (10am-4pm weekdays) or email: Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk

You can find support from others with arthritis by joining our online discussion forums.

We rely on donations to fund our vital work in supporting people living with arthritis. If you would like to make a contribution, please phone us on 020 7380 6540 or you can donate online.

www.arthritiscare.org.uk

Our factsheets are reviewed every 18 months. Please check our website for up-to-date information and reference sources or call 020 7380 6577.

Last reviewed: June 2011

Note

This information sheet may be photocopied and distributed freely on the condition that it is reproduced in its entirety and that it is not quoted without acknowledgement.

Home treatment for pain relief: heated pads and cold packs

5

Contact us

For confidential information and support about treatments, available care and adapting your life, contact the Arthritis Care Helpline

Freephone: 0808 800 4050

10am-4pm (weekdays)

Email: Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk

For information about Arthritis Care and the services we offer, contact us at: **www.arthritiscare.org.uk**

You can also talk to other people who are living with arthritis, through the discussion forums on our website.

Arthritis Care UK office and England regional services:

Tel: 020 7380 6500

Central England email: CentralEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk

North England email: NorthEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk

South England email: SouthEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk

Arthritis Care in Northern Ireland

Tel: 028 9078 2940

Email: Nireland@arthritiscare.org.uk

Arthritis Care in Scotland

Tel: 0141 954 7776

Email: Scotland@arthritiscare.org.uk

Arthritis Care in Wales

Tel: 029 2044 4155

Email: Wales@arthritiscare.org.uk