

HYDROTHERAPY AT HOME: HEAT

Hydrotherapy is the use of water to relax or heal. The main way it achieves this is by heating or cooling the body which results in improved circulation, increasing the flow of nutrients and carrying away wastes from tissues and organs. Heat therapy is easy to use at home to relieve tension and relax the muscles.

TIPS FOR HEAT THERAPY

Moist heat applications are considered very effective for the discomforts of arthritis, as well as general soreness and stiffness.

You probably know that standing under a hot shower can reduce your back, neck, or arthritis pain, and that soaking in a tub can help ease menstrual and muscle cramps. In the shower, try rotating your neck and shoulders and stretching out your calf muscles. Add Epsom salts and drops of essential oil such as lavender, ylang-ylang, or rose to bath water to enhance relaxation and soothe joint or muscle stiffness.

Saunas or steam baths help relieve anxiety and tension, and have been used for centuries to promote health by sweating. Follow a bath or sauna with a quick cool shower to seal in the heat by closing the pores. It also pushes the blood back to the internal organs, and leaves you feeling strong, relaxed and balanced, rather than lethargic.

Use a hot footbath to relieve upper body congestion, for example a sore throat or headache, because the blood is drawn down from the head and internal organs toward the capillaries of the feet.

For upper body tension or congestion, try soaking a towel in hot water mixed with a few drops of essential oils for relaxation (try lavender) or relieving congestion (try eucalyptus). Have your friend or loved one place the wrung-out towel over your upper back, then cover it with a dry towel or fleece (which tends to hold in the heat better). Or use a commercial heat pack according to directions.

PRECAUTIONS

If you are pregnant, or have a heart condition, diabetes, or high blood pressure, consult with your physician before using hydrotherapy. Use caution if you have sensitive skin.

Be careful with heat applications to avoid burning. If you use an electric heating pad, don't fall asleep!

RESOURCE

The Division of Biological Sciences, University of Chicago

HYDROTHERAPY AT HOME: COLD

TIPS FOR COLD THERAPY

Cold is used to reduce pain and swelling, and to tone the body.

Brief applications of cold water to the face, hands, and head can increase mental activity and alertness. It can also help tone the skin of the face.

Very cold applications, such as ice bags or bags of frozen peas should be used briefly on localized areas, like inflammation, swelling or sprains. Use for 20-30 minutes on the injury followed by 15-20 minutes off. This therapy works best when used frequently within the first 24 hours of an injury. Always use a cloth between your skin and ice. Note: If a joint or limb seems deformed or you can't bear weight or otherwise use it normally after 24 hours, contact your physician.

Source: *Take Care of Yourself: The Complete Guide to Medical Self-Care*, Donald Vickery, MD, and James Fries, MD.

ALTERNATING HOT AND COLD

You can also alternate heat with cold, further increasing circulation to enhance healing and relieve pain. Alternating application of heat and cold is sometimes called a vascular flush because the heat expands the blood vessels, and the cold constricts them, causing a flushing action.

Try alternating a hot shower with a cold one, a cold plunge after a sauna, or a series of hot and cold towels applied to an area, such as an area of chronic stress and pain like the upper back and shoulders. The general recipe for ratio of time for hot and cold applications is three to one, for example, three minutes of heat to one minute of cold. End with the cold application as it feels refreshing and pain-relieving.

PRECAUTIONS

Do not use ice or any very cold applications if you have Raynaud's disease, peripheral vascular disease, peripheral neuropathy, hypersensitivity to cold, or reduced skin sensations. Diabetics should always use caution when applying ice to their skin.

Also be careful with heat applications to avoid burning. Remain very aware of the degree of heat of an application and how it feels against your skin.