

Hot and Cold Therapies

- ◆ Some people find that heat or cold can help to relieve their back pain temporarily
- ◆ Heat is comforting and can help to relieve joint stiffness and muscle spasm
- ◆ If your pain is largely in your back and not caused by a recent injury, you may find heat beneficial
- ◆ Cold is good for helping to reduce pain and swelling in recent injuries - sprains and strains
- ◆ Cold helps to reduce pain by reducing the ability of some of the pain nerves in the skin to carry the pain messages to the brain and can be useful in chronic inflammation. So if you have sciatica, which is caused by nerve root irritation, a cold compress could be more beneficial than a hot one. You need to apply it to the source of the inflammation, in your back, rather than where the pain itself is felt, in your leg

How to Apply Hot and Cold

A packet of frozen peas wrapped in a damp tea-towel or a hot water bottle is what is usually recommended for a quick fix, but today there are several different ways of applying heat or cold - you can buy heated pads, like miniature electric blankets, bags full of gel which can be chilled or heated, body belts and cushions stuffed with wheat or hops which can be heated in the oven or microwave, or chilled in the freezer.

Before buying a special product, it's well worth trying the old-fashioned ways first. After all, if a packet of frozen peas doesn't work, any other kind of cold compress probably won't and if a hot water bottle is no help, an electric pad won't be either. But if you do find that heat or cold help relieve your pain for a while, there are some convenient alternatives to peas and hot water bottles.

Wheat Cushions filled with wheat can be placed in the microwave, or wrapped in foil and heated in the oven. Some can only be heated in a microwave - check before you buy. They can also be chilled in the freezer - they don't freeze solid, so they mould themselves comfortably to the small of your back. They come in a variety of covers and can easily be passed off as small normal cushions if you want to use them in the living room. They deliver heat rather more effectively and for longer than they do cold, but the fact that they can be used for either is a plus. They don't really get cold enough to damage the skin, but you should take care not to put a hot one on sensitive or fragile skin - best to wrap it up in a pillowcase first and unwrap it as it cools. You can even add aromatherapy oils such as lavender to help you relax.

Gel Packs are similar to wheat cushions in that they can act as either a hot or a cold compress. If you find that cold compresses help your pain, they are an effective method as they freeze well, staying malleable so that they mould themselves to your body, and hold the coldness. Although they hold heat reasonably well, they have to be heated in hot water. Whether you do it on the stove or in the microwave, lifting the hot pack out of the hot water can be a tricky business.

Body belts aren't heated in advance - they generate heat from your own body. They take a while to get started, but when they do, they become very warm - almost uncomfortably so, and you can feel a bit sticky, though there's no danger of burning. Some people find them rather awkward, as they're quite bulky, but they can be useful if you're gardening or doing work where you want to move about and keep your back warm. (There is another kind of body belt that acts like a corset and is designed to hold your

back muscles in position; these are not recommended, as they can cause muscle wastage. Be careful not to confuse them with the warming body belts.)

Electric Pads where the big advantage of an electric pad is that the heat can be regulated, and it stays warm as long as you need it. It usually comes with a washable lambs wool cover, which is cuddly but has a faintly hospital-like air about it. You can be limited as to where you can use it by the availability of electrical sockets - make sure you have a spare one close enough to the places you may want to use it. Be careful not to fall asleep with the pad turned on as you could burn yourself.

Relevant Information

BackCare booklets:

Basic Back Care <http://www.backpain.org/ecommerce/cat-leaf.php#basic>

Back to Posture <http://www.backpain.org/ecommerce/cat-leaf.php#posture>