

Low Back Pain: An Ice Pack or the Hot Tub?

Many patients perform some self-care when they first hurt their lower back, hoping this will keep them out of a doctor's office. While home remedies can sometimes make the pain go away, sometimes they don't. It just depends on what you try. When the back is first hurt, it's often a sprain/strain type of injury with accompanying muscle spasm.

When a nerve in the low back becomes pinched or irritated, the body will protect the delicate nerves by keeping you from moving and risking further nerve injury. The easiest way for the body to do this is to cause the back muscles to spasm in the injured area.

Muscle pain can be quite severe and heat can sometimes soothe the pain. For this reason, many patients take to the heating pad or to the hot tub to try and get some relief. This should be avoided in an acute injury because inflammation is present. With inflammation, there is increased heat and the additional heat you provide is like adding gasoline to a fire. The results are usually not good.

A better choice with an acute injury is to ice the area, but this also needs to be done with some caution. The simplest ice pack is ice cubes placed in a plastic bag. While effective, you can cause a frostbite injury if you leave the pack on for too long. When you first ice the area, you will go through several phases before some pain relief is achieved. At first, the pack will feel cold. The next phase is a burning sensation and the ice will almost feel hot. This is followed by an aching or throbbing sensation. Just before the area is numbed, a very sharp pain will be experienced followed by the relief you desire. It can take between five to ten minutes to go through all of the phases.

Once numbness is achieved, the pack should be removed. You should most definitely not fall asleep while the pack is on.

If this simple procedure does not solve the problem, it's best to get your spine checked by a doctor of chiropractic.