

## **Cold Therapy – Heat Therapy**

By Phil Zeltzman, DVM, DACVS, CVJ, Fear Free Certified

Cold and heat therapy can be used for various reasons explained below.

### **Cold therapy**

Cold therapy can be an easy solution to soreness after exercise, injury or surgery. Typically, cold therapy is used for the initial 72 hours.

#### **Purpose of cold therapy**

The application of cold can help reduce swelling and inflammation (a.k.a. irritation) in your pet. It relieves discomfort by reducing damage to muscles immediately after an injury, surgery or heavy exercise. In addition, cold therapy will decrease muscle spasms and lead to faster healing. Faster healing and less discomfort mean a happier pet, not to mention a happier pet owner!



#### **Application of cold therapy**

Cold therapy is most often applied to joints:

- . Shoulder, elbow or wrist in the front leg
- . Hip, knee and ankle in the back leg.

It can be used on any body part where swelling or muscle damage occurs.

#### **Technique of cold therapy**

Several devices can be used to provide cold therapy:

- . Ice packs and wraps: The simplest device is an ice pack. However, its stiffness makes it difficult to wrap around a joint like the ankle.
- . Commercial gel: Commercial gel packs and wraps would fit much better around a joint. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions on the pack.
- . Homemade ice packs: Place crushed ice in a plastic bag, remove excess air, and seal the bag.
- . Bags of frozen vegetables such as peas or corn: A bag of frozen vegetables, such as peas or corn, is an easy way to have an instant and cheap cooling device. Make sure you label it “ice pack only” with a permanent marker so nobody eats it after multiple thawing cycles!



. One of my favorite techniques is to mix 1 cup rubbing alcohol and 3 cups water in a Ziploc® bag and place it in the freezer. To be safe, put another bag around the first one in case of leakage. For a larger body part, simply multiply the amounts. The result is a slushy solution that conforms or molds very nicely to any part of the body and will apply the cold more evenly.

### **Danger of cold therapy**

Burning the skin (similar to frostbite) is probably the biggest risk of applying cold therapy to a pet. Therefore, always place a thin cloth such as a T-shirt or a pillowcase on your dog's skin, and then place the cold pack on top of the cloth. This trick will also reduce the surprise of instantly feeling cold on a sore area.

### **Use of cold therapy**

Keep the cooling device in place on the affected body part for about 15 minutes, or until your pet's skin feels cold to the touch. Cold therapy can be repeated every 6 to 8 hours.

If your pet displays any signs of discomfort during this process such as excessive movement, growling or biting, stop the cold therapy treatment immediately.

Cold therapy is an effective, cheap and easy way to help your pet feel better after an injury or exercise, helping them to enjoy more happiness and quality time with you and your family.

## **Heat Therapy**

Heat therapy is an easy and effective way to make your pet feel happier while relieving discomfort associated with injury, surgery, exercise or even arthritis.

### **Purpose of heat therapy**

The application of heat is used to reduce stiffness and muscle spasms, increase blood flow and relieve discomfort. Unlike cold therapy, heat therapy is applied after the initial swelling and inflammation (a.k.a. irritation) stage of an injury. Typically, cold therapy is used for the initial 72 hours. Heat therapy is preferred after that time period.

Heat therapy can also be used for ongoing conditions such as arthritis. By reducing stiffness, heat therapy helps to improve joint range of motion during and after exercise. In addition to these healing benefits, heat therapy provides comfort, relaxation and anxiety reduction.

### **Application of heat therapy**

Heat therapy is most commonly applied to joints: shoulders, elbows and wrists in the front legs; and hips, knees and ankles in the back legs. It can be used on any part of your pet's body where muscle damage, strain or spasm occurs.

For example, a pet with a disc problem in the spine (neck or back) may have muscle spasms, which heat therapy can relieve.

### **Technique when using heat therapy**

Many forms of commercial heating devices, wraps and electrical heating blankets are available in sporting goods stores and pharmacies. Instructions on the packaging should be carefully followed to avoid burning your pet's skin.



Alternatively, a simple homemade heating device consists of a tube sock filled with uncooked rice and tied at the open end. This “rice sock” can then be microwaved to the desired temperature. How long you need to warm it up will depend on your microwave. Before applying the rice sock on your dog's skin, shake it a few times to make sure the heat is distributed evenly.

### **Danger of heat therapy**

Burning the skin is probably the biggest risk of applying heat therapy to a pet. Your heating device should be warm, never hot.

Don't apply the device directly to your pet's skin. Padding, such as a thin towel, should always be used between the heating device and your pet's skin to avoid burning.

Always test the temperature of the heating device on your inner wrist (similar to testing the temperature of a baby's bottle) before applying it to your pet's skin. Test it on your skin for about 30 seconds before using it on your pet.

### **Appropriate heat therapy use**

After your pet has surgery, an injury, or goes through any strenuous physical activity, heat therapy may be an option. It is important however to wait for 72 hours before applying heat to the affected area: remember, cold therapy is applied for the first 3 days following surgery or an injury.

- . Hold the warm pack in place on the affected body part for about 15 minutes, or until the skin feels warm to the touch
- . Heat therapy can be repeated every 6 to 8 hours.

It is not unusual for your dog to fall asleep during the heat therapy process, which shows how soothing this treatment can be. If your pet displays any signs of discomfort during the therapy such as excessive movement, growling or biting, stop the treatment immediately and contact your veterinarian.



Heat therapy is a simple, yet effective way to help your pet feel better after an injury, surgery or exercise. At the same time, it will increase comfort, relaxation, and happiness for both your pet and yourself.