Patient Information:

“RICE” Therapy

Few athletes, whether serious or casual, completely avoid injuries to soft body tissues like muscles (strains) or ligaments (sprains). Though pain sprains or strains often do not require a trip to the doctor’s office. What, then, is a mildly injured body to do to get on the right track to healing?

The “RICE” method can help you control pain and swelling and minimize the side effects of an injury. RICE stands for rest, ice, compression, and elevation.

RICE is nice: When tissue is damaged, fluid accumulates in the injured area, leading to swelling. Swelling will limit the motion of the joint and may cause pain if it gets bad enough. RICE therapy is important because swelling in an extremity is hard to reverse once it’s been there awhile, it is best to prevent it first place.

Rest is essential to keep an injury from getting worse. If you ignore the problem, you may continue to aggravate the tissue damage. This doesn’t mean you have to stop completely. You can try “relative rest,” which means continuing an activity if pain allows, or switching to an activity that doesn’t cause pain—like swimming for an ankle sprain. If the activity hurts, don’t do it. If it doesn’t hurt, continue. It may mean you can do only part of an activity—ground strokes in tennis but not serves, for example—but this might be better than stopping completely.

Ice or anything cold can effectively decrease pain from an injury icing deadens pain and beneficially changes blood circulation: It increases circulatory skin but decreases it in deeper tissues where bleeding may be occurring. An ice pack can be used on the injured part as soon as possible and kept in place for 20 minutes. Place a thin sheet, napkin, or layer of mineral oil between the skin and the pack to protect the skin surface. Smaller areas can be treated with ice massage. Water frozen in a paper cup can be rubbed on the injury for 5 to 10 minutes (peel back the top of the cup to expose the ice). If the skin turns blue during icing or ice massage, stop immediately. Cold treatments can be repeated every 2 hours. There is no advantage to using ice packs or longer or more often. And greater exposure to the cold increases the risk of frostbite.

Compression of the injured area also can prevent fluid from accumulating. An elastic wrap or stocking can be very effective. It should be applied firmly, right away. (You can ice right through a thin wrap.) If the part of the arm or leg that is farthest from the heart throbs, the wrap is too tight and needs loosened. Reapply compression wraps every 4 hours. Compression will help if the swelling is from bleeding, and it may also decrease pain. The reason is not well understood, but many people feel better with something tight (but not too tight) on an injured wrist or ankle.

Elevation of the affected extremity limits swelling by using gravity to help drain fluid from the injured tissue. Of course, this advice is more practical and hands than backs and hips. Whenever you rest elevate your injured arm or leg.

Getting Back in Shape: Using the RICE method for pain control may allow you to work gradually back into your exercise regimen without taking a lot of time away from your sport. But remember: You are not healed just because the injury does not hurt anymore. You still have to regain strength. Until this happens, you are more likely to get re-injured.

What About Heat?

Heat, like ice, can deaden pain and many people will attest that it feels good. The problem is that it can also promote swelling something you want to avoid after an injury. Also, heat may increase deep circulation, which can be devastating if bleeding is involved. Once the injury is under control, however, and your greatest discomfort is associated with stiffness, heat can help. Usually this means at least 2 or 3 times a day until the swelling is gone. You can use hot packs or a hot bath or whirlpool joint before activity. But beware: if any swelling develops, stay away from the heat.

Using “RICE” for injury relief (Tom Rizzo, PSM 1996)

Remember: This information is not intended as a substitute for medical treatment. If you or swelling or have another medical concern, contact your physician.

Should you have any additional questions, please do not hesitate to contact our office. We will be more than happy to answer any questions you may have.