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"treating the cause of your problem, not just the symptoms"

Heat on an Injured Neck or Back?

While the overall qualities of warmth and heat have long been associated with comfort and relaxation, the use of heat in assisting with the treatment of neck and back pain have been shown to be quite effective in providing both pain relief and promotion of healing. To understand how exactly this works, you need to know the mechanisms of most neck and low back injuries.

Most lower back or neck injuries are really just a combination of up to four separate problems –sprained joints, irritated or pinched nerves, inflammation, and muscle spasm. Often, all four of these problems are present in varying degrees. When the nerves exiting between the vertebrae of the spine are being pinched or irritated, they function in a “hyperactive” or “excited” state. These “excited” nerves control the sensation of pain, as well as the muscles along your spine, leading to acute pain and muscle spasm.

Although the goal in our office is to eliminate the irritation of the nerves as well as decreasing the muscle spasm, you can use heat on your own to help relieve the latter. By using heat therapy, the muscle spasm can be temporarily relieved which will decrease their contribution to the overall pain. It does this through several different mechanisms.

Heat dilates the blood vessels of the muscles surrounding the lumbar spine. This process increases the flow of blood, which carries oxygen and nutrients to the muscles, helping to speed up the healing of the damaged tissue.

As mentioned above, heat makes the blood vessels in and around the muscles dilate or enlarge, allowing more blood to enter the muscle tissue. All muscles require a constant supply of blood and oxygen to relax or loosen. Therefore, the more blood that can enter the area, the looser the muscles will become. This results in an increase in flexibility and mobility of the injured area. This is a positive thing because the more you are able to move, within reason, the faster your injury will heal.

Heat stimulates the sensory receptors in the skin. The theory is that this will override or decrease the transmissions of pain to the brain and partially relieve the discomfort.

There are several other significant benefits of heat therapy that make it so appealing. Compared to most therapies, it is quite inexpensive (and in many circumstances it's free - such as taking a hot bath). It is also easy to do - it can be done at home while relaxing, and portable heat wraps also make it an option while at work or in the car. For many people, heat therapy works best when combined with other treatment modalities, such as chiropractic "adjustments" and massage therapy. Relative to most medical treatments available and similar to chiropractic treatment, heat therapy is appealing to many people because it is a non-invasive and non-pharmaceutical form of pain relief.

One of the few negative effects of using heat on an injured area is that if done too soon, it may make your condition worse. If your neck or back injury is still vulnerable to becoming re-aggravated or inflamed, you should be using cold therapy or ice instead. Be sure to ask your chiropractor when you can start using heat instead of ice in order to prevent prolonging your pain and suffering.