

News: Drug-free Rx to end aches & pains

With an alarming number of studies showing the dangers of pain medication, more doctors are recommending alternative strategies. One getting rave reviews: cryotherapy

Could extreme cold be the key to ending pain without side effects associated with drugs, such as GI distress and a higher risk of liver failure and stroke? Practitioners of whole-body cryotherapy believe so. At a growing number of clinics across the country, everyone from professional athletes to people sidelined by pain are stripping down to stand in chambers supercooled by nitrogen gas. For up to 4 minutes, they shiver in temperatures of -200°F to -260°F to reap the benefits seen in preliminary studies: reduction of pain-triggering inflammatory biomarkers, speedier tissue repair and bonuses like an energizing endorphin boost that lasts up to 2 weeks.

But you don't need clinical treatments to benefit from cold's healing power, assures Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D., author of *Pain Free 1-2-3*. "Less extreme forms of cold therapy are powerful pain reducers too," he says. "And unlike whole-body cryotherapy, which requires medical supervision, you can implement targeted strategies at home for little or no money."

BEST FOR MIGRAINES

When researchers at the University of Hawaii at Manoa had migraine sufferers place an ice pack across their throat for 30 minutes, 77 percent of people reported their pain levels plummeted. Cold packs seem to work by chilling blood flow to the brain through the carotid arteries that run along the sides of the throat. "We understand the effects better than the mechanism," admits lead study author Adam Sprouse-Blum, M.D., now a headache fellow at The University of Vermont Medical Center in Burlington. "What we do know is that unlike some drug remedies, cold therapy offers a durable benefit with no side effects. It's a no-brainer."

BEST FOR MUSCLE PAIN

If you've ever pulled a hamstring or suffered a knot in your calf, you likely tried massage and winced at the pressure. A better strategy: Massage with ice, which numbs the area so you can perform a deeper, more healing massage, advises Dr. Teitelbaum. To do: Freeze water in a paper cup (or in a reusable container like the Cryocup, \$8, Amazon.com), then use the frozen block to firmly rub the sore spot with small circular motions for 5 to 10 minutes before gently flexing and stretching the muscle. "I've had patients who have suffered for 20 years with severe muscle discomfort, going to major pain centers," says Dr. Teitelbaum. "Then in one day, I'm able to release their pain with simple massage and cold."

BEST FOR JOINT ACHES

Tingly topicals like Tiger Balm soothe achy knees, elbows and hips by up to 28 percent—and Dr. Teitelbaum says you can double that healing power if you store these products in the fridge. "Pain signals and cold signals run on the same nerve fibers, kind of like a telephone line," he explains. "An ointment or spray that creates a sensation of coolness due to ingredients such as menthol will tie up the line, so pain gets the busy signal." Apply two to three times daily, and for long-term joint health, Dr. Teitelbaum recommends following each application with a layer of plant-derived comfrey cream. "In addition to numbing the area, comfrey speeds the healing of tendons and cartilage." In a 2013 study, patients with knee osteoarthritis saw symptoms lessen by 41 percent when they used comfrey for 3 weeks. One to try: Terry Naturally TraumaPlant Comfrey Cream (\$21 for 1.76 oz., Vitacost.com). *

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