

Reducing pain or swelling in your limbs/ joints by hot and cold contrast bath

Department of Physiotherapy

Information for Patients

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What is contrast bathing?

This is a form of therapy which involves placing your affected body part in warm/ hot water, followed immediately by cold water. Research suggests that this process has a positive affect on blood flow to the limb which helps to speed up the healing process. It may also reduce your swelling and ease any pain you have.

What conditions may be helped by contrast baths?

Contrast baths can help after:

- soft tissue injuries.
- some surgical procedures on the advice of your therapist.
- exercise to reduce lactic acid.

When should I not use contrast baths?

You should not try the contrast bathing technique if you have:

- Raynaud's disease
- Buerger's disease
- poor blood circulation in the affected area
- heart disease/ angina
- high blood pressure (uncontrolled)
- a lack of feeling (sensation) in your skin.
- open wounds.

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Steps to follow for treatment

Before you start check your skin has normal sensation to heat and cold.

1. Fill a container (e.g. a washing up bowl or bucket) with cold water from the tap. Add ice cubes if you have some.
2. Fill a 2nd container with warm water; this should be a comfortable temperature.
3. Test the temperature of the water with your elbow before starting treatment.
4. Immerse the affected limb in the warm water for ____ minutes and move your affected limb / joint whilst in the water.
5. Next, immerse the limb in the cold water for ____ minutes, and move your affected limb / joint whilst in the water.

You can repeat steps 4 and 5 again.

Always check your skin during the treatment; if it becomes red, blanched or bruised stop the treatment and consult your physiotherapist.

References

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Stanton DB, Bear-Lehman J, Graziano M, Ryan C.

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