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Turn Up the Heat for Ankylosing Spondylitis Relief

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When you have pain from ankylosing spondylitis, heat can help. Learn how to use heat treatment for arthritis pain relief.



The pain and joint stiffness that often accompanies ankylosing spondylitis can make exercise or doing everyday activities difficult or even impossible. Along with medication, exercise, and physical therapy, heat for ankylosing spondylitis can be an effective treatment. Warmth increases blood flow, which helps ease pain, said Marianne Ryan PT, OCS, owner of MRPT Physical Therapy in New York City and a spokeswoman for the American Physical Therapy Association.

In ankylosing spondylitis, inflammation of the vertebrae in the spine causes pain and potentially can lead the joints to grow together, or fuse. In many people, pain isn't limited to the spine; joints in the shoulders, ribs, knees, hips, and feet also can be tender and painful. The eyes and bowels can be affected, too.

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People with ankylosing spondylitis also can develop inflammation near where the tendons attach to the bones, a condition called enthesitis, said Olivia Ghaw, MD, an assistant professor of medicine in the rheumatology division at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. "As a result, they can develop a lot of muscle stiffness and spasms." Heat therapy for arthritis or ankylosing spondylitis, "tends to help with that and increases mobility in the neck," Dr. Ghaw said. "That increased mobility translates into less disability."

What's the Best Type of Heat Treatment for Arthritis?

Both Ghaw and Ryan recommended using moist heat for ankylosing spondylitis because it penetrates deeper into the muscles than dry heat. To help relieve pain associated with arthritis, give these sources of heat therapy a try:

Warm baths and showers. Total immersion increases blood flow throughout the body, Ryan said. Increased circulation helps clear lactic acid and other toxins from stiff muscles and helps loosen them up, she added. If you're especially stiff in the morning, try a soothing warm bath or shower soon after you wake up.

Hot tubs. It can be very soothing to soak in a hot tub, as well. However, ask your doctor if using one is safe for you. Pregnant women and those with diabetes, high blood pressure, and certain other health problems may need to avoid hot tubs.

Heating pads. Microwaveable moist heat pads are available at drugstores and online. Make sure to follow the manufacturer's directions on how long to heat them. Most come with a case, which is important to use to avoid burning yourself. You also can make a heating pad by popping a wet washcloth in a freezer bag, placing it in the microwave for a minute, and then wrapping it in a cloth before applying it to where you have pain. Ghaw said to use heat therapy for ankylosing spondylitis for 10 minutes on and 10 minutes off to avoid burns.

Paraffin wax baths. Sometimes, ankylosing spondylitis can affect joints in feet or hands. Paraffin wax baths could help, said Ryan. The wax is heated to a liquid, then the feet or hands are dipped in the wax. The wax is left on for a few minutes until it solidifies slightly before being peeled off. Paraffin wax baths can be purchased online or in stores. The treatment also is available at many nail salons.

Ryan does not recommend heating ointments like Tiger Balm or Bengay because, she said, "the heating effect is very superficial."

Sometimes, cold is better than heat therapy for arthritis. "If a joint is severely inflamed and swollen," said Ghaw, "it could respond better to cold." Cold packs, soaking in cold water, ice massage, and other cooling techniques may be effective. Talk to your rheumatologist or physical therapist about what might work for you.

Last Updated: 10/10/2013

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