

Nondrug Pain and Symptom Management

HEAT

HEAT – Heat treatments are placed at or near the site to relieve pain. Relieves pain by:

- improving circulation to skin and muscles,
- relaxes muscles and reducing muscle spasms and irritation, and
- decreasing sensitivity to pain

Heat treatment options:

- Moist compress
- Instant heat pack
- Portable hot water therapy pump
- Adhesive warming patch
- Gel/clay pack

Heat application guidelines:

DON'T:

- Use if it increases the pain
- Use on areas being treated by radiation or open wounds
- Do not put boiling water in a hot water bottle or on a washcloth - water temperature should be between 104 and 113 degrees Fahrenheit
- Do not apply heat directly over transdermal medication patch
- **NEVER USE PRODUCTS CONTAINING MENTHOL WHEN USING HEAT.** These products cause skin to absorb heat more deeply and might cause burns (examples: Icy Hot or Ben-Gay)
- Use heat on an acute injury; may increase circulation of inflammatory cytokines to area or increase bleeding
- Use a heat lamp

DO:

- Regularly check skin areas for irritation or burns and document assessment
- Think WARM, not HOT. Keep a single layer of material between heat source and skin
- Use moist heat... increases effect of heat and cold
- Apply heat on the area for 20 to 30 minutes every 2 hours

CAREFUL USE:

- Patient with peripheral neuropathies - use caution in areas where there is an impaired ability to feel
- On elders with thin/fragile skin
- Heating pad, on lowest setting, while elder is awake

Necessary equipment for warm, moist compress treatment:

1. Small hand towel
2. Compress (e.g., flax seeds bag, clay pack, reusable gel pack)
3. Thermometer (type used for pools or spas)
4. Six-inch elastic wrap, or other device to secure the pack

Directions:

1. Flax seed or clay/gel compress can be microwaved per manufacturer's instructions
2. Place towel in warm water, or moist towel can be placed in a towel warmer.
3. Check temperatures of moist towel and compress, making sure that temperatures of both items are between 104 and 113 degrees Fahrenheit.
4. Wrap warm moist towel around the warmed compress
5. Apply to appropriate area and secure loosely with elastic wrap
6. Keep towel/compress on area for as long as possible to obtain relief, usually 20 – 30 minutes. Re-warm when towel or compress is no longer warm. Check temperature each time the compress is reapplied. Typically applied intermittently on skin for 10 – 20 minutes at a time. May be used for any length of time as long as skin is not irritated.
7. Try alternating hot and cold to improve comfort. Find correct area or temperature that provides optimal pain relief.

Adapted from:

1. Fouladbakhsh, J.M., et al., Nondrug therapies for pain management among rural older adults. *Pain Manag Nurs*, 2011. 12(2): p. 70-81.

NOTE: The direct care worker should only administer non-drug therapies that are within his/her particular scope of practice. Please follow the policies and procedures of your setting regarding administration of nondrug therapies.