



Texas Orthopedics,
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Knee Surgery/Arthroscopy: Icing

I don't think it's possible to ice too much after surgery! People often ask me if they should ice twenty minutes on and twenty minutes off. My answer to that is "no." You should ice as much as possible, especially during the first 3-4 days after surgery. If you are resting, with your leg elevated, you should have an ice pack on your surgical site.

You don't have to have an ice pack on continuously, but you should be icing often. If you get up to walk around, of course you can remove the ice pack. But if you really want to be consistent, you can use an ace wrap to strap the bag of ice or a gel pack to your knee. Like I said, you really can't ice too much.

My preference for icing after knee surgery is to use a giant ice bag. Don't use a little zip lock bag of ice cubes. Get a **kitchen garbage bag** and fill it up with ice. Make it about the size of a floppy watermelon. Then double bag it, put a towel across your knee and smother that knee with the ice bag. When the bag of ice melts, get another one. Unless you have a very efficient ice maker or ice machine at home, you will need a cooler full of ice. Get stocked up on ice *before* your surgery.

The towel across the knee is important. Right after surgery it's there to keep your dressing from getting wet. Once the dressings are removed, it's there to protect your skin. **NEVER APPLY AN ICE PACK DIRECTLY TO YOUR SKIN.** It can burn your skin. After about 20 minutes, the skin under the ice pack gets numb and you won't feel the burning sensation. That's where the 20 minutes off and 20 minutes on thing came from. It's protection against burning your skin. But if you protect your skin with a towel, that is less likely to happen.

The gel packs you buy in the store or the ones you make at home (see below) are useful once your dressings come off. If the gel pack comes with a fabric liner, then you can apply it directly to your knee. But if it is plastic, or if you make your own, you must put a piece of fabric between it and your skin. **NEVER APPLY ICE DIRECTLY TO YOUR SKIN.**

Homemade "Gel Packs"

Get a quart sized Ziploc bag and fill it with 2 cups of water and 1 cup of rubbing alcohol. Zip the bag nearly all the way closed and squeeze as much of the air out as possible. Then zip it closed. Put it inside another bag. Squeeze the air out of that one too. Put it in the freezer. I usually make several of these at a time, putting a paper towel in between each one and stacking them in the freezer.

The alcohol lowers the freezing temperature and makes mushy ice rather than a hard block of ice. It takes a full day for these to "set up" but you can reuse them several times. After awhile they start leaking and you have to put the mixture into new bags.

And remember...**NEVER APPLY THEM DIRECTLY TO YOUR SKIN.**

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