

By ADRIAN MONTI

FREEZE!

That's what can help everything from migraines to cramp (and if the cold doesn't work, turn up the heat!)

REACHING for a bag of frozen vegetables or filling up a hot-water bottle are standard steps for easing aches and pains.

And now there's a variety of products available to cool or warm parts of the body to treat different ailments. But do these approaches work? We asked leading experts to assess a selection of cold and hot treatments. We then rated them.

FOOT PAIN

HEEL That Pain slippers, £16.95, amazon.co.uk

CLAIM: These lightweight slippers can be frozen or heated in hot water and are said to reduce inflammation and swelling caused by heel spurs (bony protrusions) and plantar fasciitis (where the thick ligament on the sole becomes inflamed). You wear them for 15 minutes at a time with socks.

EXPERT VERDICT: Matthew Fitzpatrick, a consultant podiatrist at London North West University NHS Trust and spokesperson for the College of Podiatry, says: 'Cold and warm therapy does bring some relief of acute pain in the heel and foot.'



'Using these slippers may help but no more than using a bag of frozen peas against your foot for 20 minutes will. There is no real evidence that thermal treatment helps with heel spurs — the only way to get rid of them is with surgery.'

'Those with plantar fasciitis might benefit more from using a frozen plastic bottle to roll underneath their foot. This has a cooling effect on the soft tissue irritation while the rolling action will massage the sole and stretch the inflamed area. My fear is that even though you are told not to walk in them, you could slip while standing in them.'

5/10

PILES

MAGIC Gel haemorrhoid treatment, £10.99, gelpacks.com

CLAIM: You store these gel packs — each roughly the shape and size of an egg, but flat on one side — in the freezer and, when needed, put them in your underwear close to the back passage to soothe haemorrhoids — swollen blood vessels around the anus. The maker says the ice packs will shrink external haemorrhoids and reduce pain, itching, and soreness.

EXPERT VERDICT: David McArthur, a consultant colorectal surgeon at the Heart of England NHS Trust and Spire Parkway Hospital in Solihull, says: 'The cooling effect could provide short-term relief to the discomfort of haemorrhoids. Indeed the cold temperature will reduce blood flow to the piles and this should shrink them. But it won't prevent piles returning.'

'Allow the gels to warm up slightly after taking them out of the freezer, to avoid damage to the delicate tissue around the back passage. And before turning to these, ensure you get a proper diagnosis as similar symptoms (itch, blood or pain, for example) could be caused by other conditions, such as an anal fissure (a tear in the tissue), a skin tag or, rarely, cancer.'

8/10

SHOULDER STRAIN

URBAN Pronto heated electric rotator cuff support, £37.17, urbanpronto.com

CLAIM: This soft brace is worn over one shoulder and secured with a strap. You select one of four heat levels, which, it is claimed, will increase blood circulation and ease pain after a dislocated

shoulder, sprain, frozen shoulder and injuries in the rotator cuff (the muscles that keep the shoulder stable).

EXPERT VERDICT: Malin Wijeratna, a consultant shoulder and elbow surgeon at Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, says: 'Heat therapy is better for long-term pain while ice therapy is better for acute injuries and this is the case with shoulders. So this may not work well, but is worth a try.'

'There are two types of heat therapy: moist heat, which is provided by a hot-water bottle or a warm bath; and dry heat from a heated pad found in this product.'

'The different types of heat provide similar benefits but moist heat can reach the muscle four times faster. However, heated products should only be used for short periods — about 20 minutes — at a moderate setting as high heat for extended periods can cause tissue damage.'

MIGRAINE

MIGRA-CAP, £39.99, lloydspharmacy.com

CLAIM: This Lycra cap is fitted with gel packs that have a cooling

effect on the head, and covers the eyes to shut out light that may exacerbate a migraine. Store in the fridge and use when you feel a migraine starting.

EXPERT VERDICT: Dr Paul Jarman, a consultant neurologist at the Wellington Hospital and NHS National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, both in London, says: 'There's no doubt many people with migraines are sensitive to light. As well as offering relief that way, this cap also cools the head.'

'It works because coldness disrupts pain signals in the trigeminal nerve from the head and face to the brain. This cap may be useful for some people as an additional aid, but won't be as effective as taking the likes of triptan medication for pain relief.'

6/10

CRAMPS

ARRIS electric heating waist belt wrap, £40.98, amazon.co.uk

CLAIM: You wear this rechargeable wide fabric belt around your middle to warm your lower back and abdomen, which, the maker says, increases circulation and relieves pain, tension and cramp. It can be set to one of three temperatures — from 40c to 80c.

EXPERT VERDICT: Gary Jones, a consultant physiotherapist at Physio 206 in Birmingham and

Bromsgrove, says: 'Heat increases blood circulation in an area, which works well on long standing pain.'

'By contrast, ice is better for sudden, acute injuries as it reduces inflammation. This brace is adaptable and can be wrapped around any painful areas. However, it claims to reach higher temperatures than other products and I'd be wary of this.'

'It has a built-in safety device to stop it overheating but you should still check your skin every 15 minutes in case of burning. Personally, I'd rather use a hot-water bottle.'

5/10

KNEE ARTHRITIS

KNEE heat, £15.59, pslove.com

CLAIM: Once you open the packet, the pad inside will instantly heat up to around 60c, which it says will last up to 12 hours. The heat is created by the iron filling inside the pad reacting with the air. Secure with the elastic band provided; it is said to be suitable for arthritis, stiff joints or general knee pain.

EXPERT VERDICT: Gary Jones, consultant physiotherapist at Physio 206, says: 'People I see with arthritis report that heat therapy

is beneficial. This device is not bad, but a hot-water bottle would probably be as effective and cheaper. This support might make going up and downstairs more comfortable in the short term, but it won't improve the long-term function of your knee.'



'Its instructions say that after every hour you should remove it for five minutes to let your skin rest; but I think this is too long and you should check it at least every 20 minutes.'

6/10

BACKACHE

MAGIC Gel extra large ice pack for injuries £19.99, amazon.co.uk

CLAIM: This oversized ice pack — 60cm by 38cm — can cover the back, hips, neck and spine at the same time. It is filled with a clay substance so it will contour around the body and stay flexible. Place on top of clothing rather than in direct contact with skin, for up to 20 minutes at a time.

EXPERT VERDICT: Lyndsay Hart, physiotherapist at yourpilatesphysio.com, says: 'As the clay makes this product heavier than one filled with a gel, it should have some extra therapeutic benefit as it is weightier and it will be more in contact with the injury.'

'Ice is best used for something that is swollen and inflamed, rather than a chronic pain. But this is good as it covers a large area, and often pain, particularly back pain, can radiate outwards and cause other muscles close by to be affected.'

'In general, I recommend heat, rather than ice, for back pain as heat has a better effect on muscle spasms.'

6/10

CARPAL TUNNEL

HOT and Cold Gel Wrist Support, £9.99, stressnomore.co.uk

CLAIM: This contains a reusable gel pack that you can microwave or freeze. When needed you put the gel pad into the fabric support and secure it around your wrist with a hook and loop fixing. It is said to help with sprains and carpal tunnel syndrome — pressure on the nerve in the wrist which can cause numbness or tingling.

EXPERT VERDICT: Dan Armstrong, a consultant hand and wrist surgeon at the NHS Royal Derby Hospital, says: 'Whether you use it hot or cold comes down to personal choice — they will have a similar, albeit limited, effect.'

'This splint offers support and compression, which are both good for a wrist injury, while allowing you to use your hand.'

'But I don't think it will be that helpful for carpal tunnel as this requires a splint that takes the pressure off the nerves — and that is best achieved by not bending the wrist. I would give a patient a much more rigid splint that stretches from the palm of the hand to a third of the way up the forearm.'

3/10

AN ICE MASK FOR ALLERGIES

The Eye Doctor eye compress, £7.99, feelgoodcontacts.com

CLAIM: You store this eye mask in the fridge and wear it to relieve the symptoms of hay fever, allergies, inflammation and itchy eyes.

EXPERT VERDICT: Marlene Hochstrasser, a nurse and clinical director of the Devon Allergy Clinic, says: 'When we suffer an allergic reaction such as hay fever, our body reacts by

producing an excessive amount of histamine which often causes symptoms including watery, itchy eyes. Using something cool like this might feel soothing as it reduces inflammation caused by the allergic reaction, but it's only a temporary relief. To properly tackle the symptoms, you would need to take antihistamine or steroid medication. A cold flannel or even sliced cucumber would be just as effective.'

2/10

