



West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals

NHS Trust



A guide to...

Contrast Bathing

Patient Information

Watford General Hospital
Hemel Hempstead Hospital
St Albans City Hospital
West Hertfordshire Therapy Unit

Contrast bathing involves placing the affected limb in **warm** water, followed immediately by **cold** water. This process is repeated several times, alternating between the two temperatures. The use of hot and cold is proven to be excellent in reducing swelling and stiffness, through improving circulation within your blood vessels. It also helps improve your pain and range of movement when completed in conjunction with your home exercise programme.

It should only be carried out when advised by your physio-therapist, once the wounds have healed and closed. It is important to ensure that the sensation of your skin is intact and that you can feel the difference between hot and cold temperatures to avoid burns.

What do I need?

- Two buckets/washing up bowls big enough for the affected limb to be submerged
- **Warm** water (not boiling water) and **cold** water and ice cubes
- A stopwatch/clock with a second hand.

Ensure that you test the temperature of the water before you immerse your limb. Check the temperature of the water by feeling the bowl and testing the temperature of a small amount of water on your skin.

What do I do?

- Fill one bowl with ice cubes and cold water and the other both with warm water - the same temperature that you would have in a warm bath, hot but not burning your skin
- Fully immerse the affected area in the hot water for 60 seconds, then immediately place the limb in the cold water for a further 60 seconds
- Repeat this process for 5-10 minutes, ensuring that you finish with your limb in the **warm** water.

You may be instructed to open and close your hand into a fist or 'pump' your ankles whilst your limb is immersed in the water.

How often should I do this?

- Contrast bathing can be performed at any point during the day, however may be most beneficial in the morning or before bed
- You can complete the cycle every two hours if needed to help with pain, swelling and stiffness
- Using contrast bathing before or after your therapist prescribed exercise plan can help with pain and stiffness whilst performing/after completing your exercises and related swelling

Frequently Asked Questions

Should I contrast bath my limb if I have pins and needles, numbness or sensation changes?

It is important to be mindful that if your sensation to hot and cold is impaired, that you may be putting yourself at risk of heat or ice burns. If you have some sensation and are able to discriminate between hot and cold then do not exceed the length of time advised in the bath.

Should I contrast bath if my wound is open?

No, do not immerse in hot or cold water if your wound is open. Speak with your therapist if it is open. You can use a hot water bottle or an ice pack to produce similar responses away from the wound, speak to your therapist regarding this.

Should I contrast bath if my wound is infected?

Do not immerse your limb if it is infected. This is likely if the wound is unusually red, painful and/or oozing. Speak with your therapist if it is open. You can use a hot water bottle or an ice pack to produce similar responses away from the wound.

If you are unsure about any advice or information, please arrange to contact fracture clinic or contact the Physiotherapy department using the below contact details.

West Hertfordshire Therapy Unit
Jacketts Field
WD5 0PA

Tel: 01923 378130
Email: westherts.opphysioadvice@nhs.net

If you need this leaflet in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01923 217187** or email westherts.pals@nhs.net



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