



ADVICE ON THE USE OF ICE PACKS FOR BUMPED HEADS IN SCHOOLS

Ice packs have become increasingly common in schools – usually deployed as a means of treating minor bumps to a child’s head and, in many cases, even when there is not a mark or swollen area to be seen. There is strong anecdotal evidence that parental pressure has influenced the huge rise in the number of ice packs used in school settings, with reports of displeasure and complaints against the staff when they are either not available for use or not used at all.

Over the course of the past few years we have been advocating the reversal of a seemingly popular policy to treat such injuries with chemical ice packs, despite the absence of official regulations instigating their use, or evidence of their potency for healing.

At PRS we do NOT recommend the use of ice packs for children with minor head bumps. Although there are lots of reasons given for their use, the benefits are overshadowed by the possible risks where chemical ice packs are concerned.

There are icepacks available that use non-toxic and completely biodegradable products, but these are not commonly used, and it is likely that the cheapest option will be an ice pack that contains a potentially harmful chemical, such as Ammonium Nitrate, Calcium Ammonium Nitrate or Urea, which, when mixed with water, creates a cold effect.

The argument FOR ice packs include:

- Reduction of swelling and pain
- Reduction of potential tissue damage
- Reduction of bruising

There is no disputing the benefits of cold on swollen, injured tissue but this can be achieved without the use of expensive ice packs. If the child is uncomfortable and the objective is to reduce swelling and pain, then surely anything cold will do – if it is safe. To that end, we recommend that nothing more than a cold, wet flannel or towel be used if the child is uncomfortable, but even then, it is unnecessary to do this for a minor head bump.

Toxicity of some ice packs

Although advertised as nontoxic, the chemicals contained in a reusable cold pack may cause mild eye irritation, localised redness of skin or, if ingested, abdominal pain, stomach upset, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. Side effects of ingestion may include headache, dizziness, drowsiness, lack of coordination, nausea and slowed reaction time, among others.

It is always possible for these packs to burst or tear or have small leaks in them and if the contents come into contact with the child's skin or eyes (especially when the ice pack is being used for a head bump), the treatment will cause further harm.

Our argument AGAINST ice packs include:

- There is a risk of chemical leakage
- They are not given as a recommended treatment for bumped heads by professional medical bodies (NHS, NICE)
- They are not used by the NHS for bumped heads in ambulances, hospitals or GP surgeries and Minor Injuries Units
- They will not make the injury better and they may disguise a more significant injury
- They are expensive when school budgets are already being squeezed
- Children are aware of their use and tend to use them as an excuse to gain attention or respite from lessons (school staff have overwhelmingly agreed that this is happening)
- Parents don't tend to stock them in their homes!

In summary

If a child has a minor head injury, with no visible mark and no swelling, it is unnecessary to treat them as there is no visible trauma to treat. Applying an ice pack just for the sake of it would be detrimental to the ethos of first aid; you don't treat an injury that simply isn't there. You may, of course, wish to reassure the child and simply monitor them for a while.

If a child has a swollen, bruised bump on the head, then there is no other treatment necessary, other than reassurance and monitoring. If you wish to apply something cold to make the child more comfortable, a clean flannel or towel, run under cold water and wrung out, can be applied to the injured area. Although this is not ice, it will have a soothing effect.

If ice simply must be used, then ice blocks can be placed into a flannel or towel and placed on the injured area for a short time. However, the advice here is not to use ice packs or ice at all but to monitor and reassure a child with a minor bumped head. There is a real danger that first aid staff may apply an ice pack to a more significant head injury and this will mask and delay more urgent treatment.

There is, of course, a place for ice packs in first aid, but it is commonly useful as a means of treating sports-related injuries and injuries to muscle or soft tissue, not skin and bone.