International Journal of Nursing and Health Research
www.nursingjournal.in
Online ISSN: 2664-6420
Received: 30-01-2026, Accepted: 28-02-2026, Published: 16-03-2026
Volume 8, Issue 1, 2026, Page No. 50-51

Role of Cryotherapy with cold saline pack in enhancing perineal wound healing after episiotomy

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Abstract
Episiotomy remains a common obstetric procedure performed to expedite childbirth and reduce severe perineal trauma. However, postoperative complications such as pain, edema, and delayed wound healing often affect maternal comfort and functional recovery. Cryotherapy application of cold therapy has been widely used in musculoskeletal injuries to reduce inflammation and facilitate healing but its role in episiotomy care is less established. Cold saline packs, a form of cryotherapy, offer a low-cost, simple intervention that could reduce perineal swelling, pain, and thereby enhance wound healing. This article critically reviews the evidence on the physiological basis of cryotherapy, the mechanisms by which cold saline packs may influence wound healing, clinical outcomes reported in research, and practical nursing implications. The synthesis of literature suggests that cryotherapy with cold saline is effective in decreasing perineal pain and edema and may support accelerated wound healing after episiotomy when used as part of standardized postnatal care. Recommendations for clinical practice, limitations in current research, and directions for future study are also discussed.

Keywords: Episiotomy, perineal wound healing, cryotherapy, cold saline pack, postpartum care, inflammation

Introduction

Episiotomy is a surgical incision in the perineum performed during the second stage of labor to enlarge the vaginal opening and facilitate childbirth (Smith & Jones, 2020) [10]. Although routinely used in many settings, episiotomy can lead to perineal pain, swelling (edema), infection, and delayed wound healing, significantly affecting a woman's postpartum recovery and quality of life (Anderson *et al*., 2018) [1].

Optimal postpartum care includes interventions that minimize discomfort and promote healing. Cryotherapy refers to therapeutic use of cold applications to reduce cellular metabolism, inflammation, and pain (Bleakley & Hopkins, 2010) [2]. Among methods of cryotherapy, cold saline packs are accessible, inexpensive, and easily applied by caregivers or nursing staff. This article examines the role of cryotherapy with cold saline packs in enhancing perineal wound healing after episiotomy, focusing on physiological mechanisms, clinical effectiveness, and implications for nursing practice.

Overview of Episiotomy and Perineal Wound Healing

Definition and Types of Episiotomies

Episiotomy involves incising the vaginal posterior fourchette and perineal body: commonly midline (median) or mediolateral. While mediolateral episiotomy reduces risk of deep perineal trauma, it may cause more pain (Garner *et al*., 2019) [3].

Normal Wound Healing Process

Wound healing progresses through three overlapping phases:

1. Inflammatory phase (0-3 days): Hemostasis and immune response.
2. Proliferative phase (3-10 days): Granulation, re-epithelialization.
3. Maturation/remodeling (>10 days): Collagen reorganization (Guo & DiPietro, 2010).

Successful healing requires minimal infection, adequate perfusion, and controlled inflammation.

Challenges in Perineal Healing after Episiotomy

Common issues include

- Pain and tenderness
- Edema from trauma and childbirth stress
- Poor hygiene and moisture accumulation
- Infection risk due to proximity to anus (Kettle & Tohill, 2009) [5]

These contribute to prolonged recovery, reduced mobility, and difficulty with daily activities.

Cryotherapy: Physiological Mechanisms and Rationale

What is Cryotherapy?

Cryotherapy is cold application therapy that uses ice, gels, cold water packs, or cold saline compresses to induce local cooling of tissues.

Physiological Effects of Cold on Tissues

Cold application influences wound environment through:

- **Vasoconstriction:** Reduces local blood flow, edema, and bleeding.
- **Decreased metabolic rate:** Lowers oxygen demand and cellular stress.
- **Nerve conduction reduction:** Reduces pain sensations and spasm.
- **Anti-inflammatory effect:** Diminishes cytokine release and leukocyte activity (Meeusen *et al*., 2013) [6].

This results in decreased pain and swelling, potentially facilitating healing.

Cold Saline Pack Specifics

Cold saline packs involve sterile saline soaked in cloth or compress and cooled (typically 2-8°C). Saline ensures conformability, moisture balance, and reduced tissue adherence compared to ice cubes.

Effectiveness of Cryotherapy with Cold Saline in Episiotomy Care

Reduction of Pain and Edema

Multiple studies indicate that cold therapy significantly reduces perineal pain within the first 24-72 hours postpartum (Yip *et al*., 2017) [11]. Women often report decreased need for analgesics.

Edema reduction is attributed to vasoconstriction and lower capillary leakage, resulting in less swelling and tension across sutured tissues.

Influence on Wound Healing Time

While pain relief is well-documented, evidence on accelerated wound healing is emerging. Some randomized controlled trials (RCTs) have shown:

- Faster re-epithelialization scores at day 7 post-episiotomy with regular cold saline application (Sharma & Gupta, 2018) [9].
- Better granulation tissue formation and reduced redness.

Mechanistically, reduced edema and inflammation create a more favorable environment for fibroblast activity and collagen deposition.

Comparison with Other Interventions

Cold saline therapy is often compared to:

- Warm sitz baths
- Topical analgesics
- No intervention

Studies suggest cryotherapy provides superior early pain relief compared to warm baths, although combined approaches may offer enhanced comfort (Panda & Pradhan, 2021) [7].

Application Protocols and Safety Considerations

Standardized Cryotherapy Protocol

Typical protocol:

- Apply cold saline pack to perineal area for 15-20 minutes
- Repeat every 2-3 hours in first 24-48 hours
- Maintain sterile or clean conditions to prevent infection

Precautions and Contraindications

Avoid prolonged exposure (>30 minutes) to reduce risk of cold injury. Patients with sensory disorders, vascular compromise, or cold hypersensitivity require careful evaluation (Parker & Clark, 2019) [8].

Implications for Nursing Practice

Assessment

- Evaluate perineal wounds daily
- Assess pain using standard scales
- Monitor edema and signs of infection

Education and Implementation

Nurses should instruct postpartum mothers on:

- Proper placement of cold saline packs
- Safe duration of application
- Signs indicating need for medical reassessment

Empowering women in self-care can improve comfort and satisfaction.

Cost-Effectiveness and Accessibility

Cold saline packs are inexpensive and easily implemented in low-resource settings, enhancing equitable care delivery.

Limitations in Current Evidence and Directions for Future Research

Limitations

- Small sample sizes in many RCTs
- Variation in cryotherapy protocols
- Difficulty blinding patients to interventions

Future Research Needs

- Large-scale multicenter trials
- Long-term functional outcomes
- Standardized application protocols

Conclusion

Cryotherapy using cold saline packs is a safe, cost-effective, and evidence-supported intervention to reduce perineal pain and inflammation after episiotomy. It may contribute to enhanced wound healing when incorporated into holistic postpartum care. Nurses play a central role in implementing and educating patients about this therapy. Future research should focus on standardized protocols and expanded clinical outcomes.

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