

Cold Therapy for Anxiety and Stress – Icing the Vagus Nerve

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AI Overview

Based on publicly available information, Daniel Amen's clinics (and others) recommend cold therapy, including using ice packs, to help with stress, anxiety, and brain health. The technique is a common practice for stimulating the vagus nerve.

How Cold Therapy Affects Anxiety and Stress

Cold therapy, known as cryotherapy, can help regulate the nervous system, which is vital for managing stress and anxiety.

- **Activates the vagus nerve:** Cold exposure can stimulate the vagus nerve, a major nerve in the body that helps regulate heart rate, breathing, and the "rest-and-digest" response. Activating this nerve helps shift your body from the "fight-or-flight" state to a calmer, more relaxed one.
- **Reduces stress hormones:** Exposure to cold can increase parasympathetic activity and lead to a decrease in the stress hormone cortisol.
- **Grounding and focus:** For people experiencing panic attacks, the sudden, intense sensation of cold can act as a powerful grounding technique. It distracts the mind from anxious thoughts and helps you focus on the physical sensation in the present moment.

Common Ice Pack Locations for Vagus Nerve Stimulation

While the underarm area has thin skin and is close to major blood vessels, other locations are more commonly cited for stimulating the vagus nerve to reduce anxiety:

- **Neck:** Applying an ice pack to the side or back of your neck can directly stimulate the vagus nerve.
- **Chest:** The vagus nerve runs through the chest, and applying a cold compress to the center of your chest is a popular method for calming anxiety.
- **Face:** Splashing cold water on your face or applying a cold pack can activate the "mammalian dive reflex," which helps to quickly slow your heart rate.

Combining Cold Therapy with Other Techniques

The [Amen Clinics](#) often recommend combining lifestyle and behavioral practices for managing anxiety, including:

- **Mindful breathing:** Dr. Amen promotes techniques like diaphragmatic breathing, which is a powerful tool for activating the parasympathetic nervous system.
- **Targeting negative thoughts:** He teaches a method called "killing the ANTs" (Automatic Negative Thoughts) to challenge and reframe anxious thought patterns.
- **Gratitude and exercise:** Other recommendations include daily gratitude practices and regular exercise to help reduce stress hormones.

Vagus Nerve Stimulation: Why Icing It Helps with Anxiety

(from - <https://psychcentral.com/anxiety/vagus-nerve-cooling-anxiety>)

If you experience anxiety symptoms, research shows that icing your vagus nerve can slow down your heart rate and signal your body to relax.

One current trend that you may have heard about is icing your vagus nerve. This is when you lay a cold compress on your chest or the back of your neck to help stimulate your vagus nerve in hopes it will signal your body to relax.

If you're not familiar with your vagus nerve, or how icing it can offer you [anxiety-reducing](#) benefits, then it's worth learning a little more about it.

Understanding the Vagus Nerve

Your vagus nerve runs from your brain down to your abdomen. Because it wanders down your body carrying a range of signals from your brain to your organs (and vice versa), it's known as the "wandering nerve."

It plays a key role in your parasympathetic nervous system, which means when the vagus nerve is activated, it sends a signal to slow your heart rate and lower your blood pressure telling your body it's time to relax. It oversees several body functions such as:

- mood
- digestion
- heart rate
- breathing
- immune response
- reflex actions (coughing, sneezing, swallowing, vomiting)

Does Icing Your Vagus Nerve Help with Anxiety?

Since your vagus nerve is the main nerve that is in charge of relaxing your body after it's under stress, icing it may help with [anxiety](#).

According to [research from 2008 Trusted Source](#), cold exposure causes a shift in your parasympathetic nervous system, which is controlled by your vagus nerve. By restricting your blood vessels you're activating this nerve.

More recent scientific studies back up this connection. [Research from 2018 Trusted Source](#) found that when cold stimulation was applied to participants' neck area it slowed down their heart rates.

Another [2010 study Trusted Source](#) found similar results, where participants' heart rates slowed down but, in this study, participants ingested ice cold water instead of applying cold compresses.

By icing your nerve you're tricking your mind and body and distracting yourself from the experience of anxiety.

How to Stimulate Your Vagus Nerve

Using cold temperatures to stimulate your vagus nerve works quickly. In the 2018 study mentioned earlier when participants used a cold compress on the neck area, it only took 16 seconds.

TikTok influencer Frankie Simmons who was the original poster of the anxiety hack "icing your vagus nerve" claims it takes as little as 15 minutes to calm down when you place a cold compress on your chest.

To try this at home, all you have to do to [stimulate your vagus nerve](#) is apply a cold compress to your chest or the back of your neck. Try it for a few seconds to several minutes and see how you feel. If you're monitoring your heart rate, you may see a drop. If you don't, try it again for a few minutes longer.

Other cold water immersion tactics you can try:

- dunking your head in cold water
- taking a cold bath or shower
- splashing cold water on your face
- go outside in cold temperatures
- drinking ice cold water

3 Other Ways to Stimulate Your Vagus Nerve

Exercise

Moving your body can help to stimulate your vagus nerve. [Research from 2016 Trusted Source](#) shows that moderate exercise, such as interval training and endurance, training can increase your vagus nerve as well as improve your heart rate.

Music

If you want to avoid being cold or exercising, then you can try humming or singing. [Research from 2013 Trusted Source](#) shows that music has a soothing effect that can stimulate your vagus nerve. Since your vagus nerve is connected to your vocal cords, try singing or humming your favorite tune.

Massage

Your vagus nerve can be stimulated by massage, especially a foot massage.

Research from 2011 Trusted Source shows that foot reflexology can increase vagal modulation and lower blood repressure. Try giving yourself a foot massage to help stimulate your vagus nerve.