Recovery tools, ranked

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Sleep and food do most of the work of recovery. Light activity and massage help a little. Compression, foam rolling and cold water have small or situational benefits. Expensive gadgets rarely beat the basics.

Why it matters: Recovery products are a big business. Spending time and money in the right order gets you more from your training.

The ranking

Rank	Tool	What it does	Evidence	Cost
1	**Sleep** (7 to 9 hours)	Restores energy, mood and performance	Strong	Free
2	**Enough food and protein**	Refuels and rebuilds muscle	Strong	Groceries
3	**Sensible training load**	Prevents digging a hole in the first place	Strong	Free
4	**Light activity** (walking, easy cycling)	Eases soreness for a while	Moderate	Free
5	**Massage**	Reduces soreness; feels good	Moderate	Low to high
6	**Foam rolling**	Small, short-term relief and flexibility	Moderate, small effect	Low
7	**Compression garments**	Small reduction in soreness	Early to moderate	Moderate
8	**Cold water immersion**	Reduces soreness; useful between games	Moderate, with trade-offs	Low to moderate
9	**Tart cherry**	May speed strength recovery	Moderate, small effect	Moderate
10	**Gadgets** (percussion guns, electrical stimulation, cryotherapy chambers)	Mostly comfort	Little evidence	Moderate to high

How to use them

Every day: sleep, food and protein, sensible training. See "Sleep, training and recovery," "The protein dose" and "Overtraining and burnout."

On sore days: walk, cycle easily, or train other muscles. See "Why your muscles get sore."

If you enjoy them: massage, foam rolling, compression. They're optional.

Between games or races close together: cold water immersion (about 10 to 15 minutes in water around 50 to 59°F) can help you feel fresher for the next event.

A warning about cold water

- Cold water right after strength training may blunt muscle and strength gains over time. In a 12-week trial, men who took a 10-minute cold bath after each session gained less strength and muscle than men who did active recovery [1]. A 2024 meta-analysis of 8 studies found the same pattern for muscle growth [2].
- If building muscle is your goal, skip the ice bath after lifting.
- Use cold water mainly when performance in the next day or two matters more than long-term gains.

Signs you need more recovery, not more tools

- Performance dropping for more than a week or two
- Poor sleep, low mood or loss of motivation
- Frequent colds or nagging aches

See "Overtraining and burnout."

Sources

1. Roberts LA, Raastad T, Markworth JF, et al. Post-exercise cold water immersion attenuates acute anabolic signalling and long-term adaptations in muscle to strength training. *Journal of Physiology*. 2015;593(18):4285–4301. doi:10.1113/JP270570
2. Piñero A, Burke R, Augustin F, et al. Throwing cold water on muscle growth: a systematic review with meta-analysis of the effects of post-exercise cold water immersion on resistance training-induced hypertrophy. *European Journal of Sport Science*. 2024;24(2):177–189. doi:10.1002/ejsc.12074

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