

Treating Burns and Scalds



To properly treat a burn, you need to know what caused it and its degree of severity. A first-degree burn causes redness, pain and sometimes mild swelling. A second-degree burn includes the same symptoms plus blistering. A third-degree burn causes a charring of the skin, relatively little pain at first. Hot objects, sunlight, chemicals and, of course, fire can cause first-, second- or third-degree burns.

Third-degree burns require swift emergency medical care. First- and second-degree burns usually require professional care if they cover more than one-fifth of the skin's surface, involve the face or genitals or impede the use of the hands or feet. You should also call a doctor if any burn doesn't begin to heal within two days, if the victim develops a fever or if a young child or elderly person gets burned.

Self Care for Minor Burns

Most sunburns or brief scalds are first-degree burns. If a small area on a hand gets burned, remove any jewelry, watches or constrictive clothing from the burned area. Immerse the hand in a container of cool water (not ice water) for a few minutes or until the pain subsides. You can also use a cold compress. Then gently clean the area with soap and water, pat dry, apply a disinfectant, such as rubbing alcohol or hydrogen peroxide, and cover the burn with a sterile, nonstick gauze pad. If a blister forms, don't break it, and never apply butter, margarine, grease, oil, petroleum jelly or ointment. Give acetaminophen for pain.

First Aid for Third-Degree or Extensive Burns

For serious burns, dial 911 or the emergency medical service for your area. Electrical burns require immediate emergency care, since deep tissue injury may not be apparent immediately. For a chemical burn, as from battery acid, flush the area with running water for at least 15 minutes, 30 minutes if the chemical gets in the eyes. Remove any clothing around the burn while keeping the burn under running water, if possible. If first aid instructions are on the battery or bottle that contained the chemical, follow them and cover the burn with a clean cloth.

While waiting for an ambulance, don't remove clothing or anything else sticking to a wound unless the cloth is saturated with corrosive chemicals. Don't touch the burned area, break any blisters or put any fluid, oil or ointment on it. You can cover the burned area with a clean cloth and loosely bind it with a larger cloth, but avoid paper towels, tissue, cotton and adhesive bandages. Cover the victim with a blanket, make sure the person is breathing, and don't give the victim food. Small, frequent sips of water may, however, be helpful if he or she is conscious.

Burn Prevention Tips

The modern home harbors all sorts of dangers from burns. Here are ways to prevent them:

- ✓ Don't put a spoon into a boiling cup of water that has just come out of a microwave oven. It can cause the water to suddenly boil up over the edge of the cup.
- ✓ Lower your water heater to 120° F (49° C). Most water heaters are preset to 160° F (71° C), which can scald in only one second.
- ✓ Never carry a pan of hot cooking oil uncovered, and never fill more than half way.
- ✓ Pressurized steam can build up under plastic wrap used to cover microwaved foods. Prick the plastic with a knife or fork and keep your fingers and face clear as the steam escapes, or use oven mitts and carefully peel the plastic back from the edge of the container farthest away from you.
- ✓ A child's bath water should always be tested with an elbow or a thermometer before putting the child in.
- ✓ Hot items should never be left near the edge of a table or on a tablecloth that can be pulled off.