

Burns: Taking Care of Burns

What causes burns?

You can get burned by heat and fire, radiation, sunlight, electricity or chemicals. There are 3 degrees of burns:

First-degree burns are red and painful. They swell a little. They turn white when you press on the skin. The skin over the burn may peel off after 1 or 2 days.

Thicker burns, called **second-degree burns**, have blisters and are painful. The skin is very red or splotchy, and it may swell a lot.

Third-degree burns cause damage to all layers of the skin. The burned skin looks white or charred. These burns may cause little or no pain because the nerves in the skin are damaged.

How long does it take for burns to heal?

First-degree burns usually heal in 3 to 6 days.

Second-degree burns usually heal in 2 to 3 weeks.

Third-degree burns usually take a very long time to heal.

How are burns treated?

The treatment depends on what kind of burn you have. If a first- or second-degree burn covers an area larger than 2 to 3 inches in diameter, or is on your face, hands, feet or genitals, you should see a doctor right away. Third-degree burns require emergency medical attention.

Do not put butter, oil, ice or ice water on burns. This can cause more damage to the skin.

First-degree burn

Soak the burn in cool water. Then treat it with a skin care product like aloe vera cream or an antibiotic ointment. To protect the burned area, you can put a dry gauze bandage over the burn. Take an over-the-counter pain reliever, such as acetaminophen (one brand name: Tylenol), ibuprofen (some brand names: Advil, Motrin) or naproxen (brand name: Aleve), to help with the pain.

Second-degree burn

Soak the burn in cool water for 15 minutes. If the burned area is small, put cool,

clean, wet cloths on the burn for a few minutes every day. Then put on an antibiotic cream, or other creams or ointments prescribed by your doctor. Cover the burn with a dry nonstick dressing (for example, Telfa) held in place with gauze or tape. Check with your doctor's office to make sure you are up-to-date on tetanus shots.

Change the dressing every day. First, wash your hands with soap and water. Then gently wash the burn and put antibiotic ointment on it. If the burn area is small, a dressing may not be needed during the day. Check the burn every day for signs of infection, such as increased pain, redness, swelling or pus. If you see any of these signs, see your doctor right away. To prevent infection, avoid breaking any blisters that form.

Burned skin itches as it heals. Keep your fingernails cut short and don't scratch the burned skin. The burned area will be sensitive to sunlight for up to one year.

Third-degree burn

For third-degree burns, go to the hospital right away. Don't take off any clothing that is stuck to the burn. Don't soak the burn in water or apply any ointment. You can cover the burn with a sterile bandage or clean cloth until you receive medical assistance.

What do I need to know about electrical and chemical burns?

A person with an electrical burn (for example, from a power line) should go to the hospital right away. Electrical burns often cause serious injury inside the body. This injury may not show on the skin.

A chemical burn should be washed with large amounts of water. Take off any clothing that has the chemical on it. Don't put anything on the burned area. This might start a chemical reaction that could make the burn worse. If you don't know what to do, call 9-1-1 or your local poison control center, or see your doctor right away.

Special Instructions: