How to Treat Burns

Burns are a common injury. When they're not too serious, burns can usually be effectively treated with simple first aid. But some burns can be more serious—even life threatening—and these require immediate professional medical attention as well as appropriate on-the-spot first aid.

This means you need to know how to treat minor burns and how to care for more serious burns until help arrives. You should be able to identify the difference between a bad burn and a minor one, too.

How bad a burn is depends on how many layers it affects. Minor heat burns just affect the outer layer of skin. They may be uncomfortable, but they aren't a big health risk. Deeper burns that injure or destroy the next layer of skin, however, are a cause for concern. When this layer is affected, the risk of infection has to be controlled. The most serious burns go very deep and injure or destroy muscle and nerve tissue.

The least serious burns are known as first-degree burns because they only affect the first layer of skin. The most serious burns are third-degree burns. First-degree burns are easy to identify. The top layer of skin gets red right away. Second-degree burns involve both reddened skin and some blistering. Third-degree burns look charred, and you might even be able to see tissue underneath the destroyed skin that appears white.

First Aid for Burns

For first- and second-degree burns:

- Treat with cold water for several minutes to cool the burn and relieve pain.
- After soaking, cover the burn with a clean dry dressing (like sterile gauze or a bandage) from the first-aid kit to prevent infection.
- Don't use ice, lotion, or ointment on a burn.
- Don't break blisters that form on a second-degree burn.
- See a doctor if the burn gets infected.

For third-degree burns:

- Call for emergency medical assistance immediately.
- Lay the victim down and elevate severely burned limbs.
- Cut away clothing if necessary, but don't try to remove clothing that is stuck to a burn.
For chemical burns:

- Call for emergency medical assistance if the burn covers a large area of the body or affects the eyes or face.
- Flush burned areas with water until emergency medical help arrives.
- Remove contaminated clothing, if possible.

**Critical burns.** Severe burns can kill. The Red Cross says that critical burns need immediate medical attention. Critical burns include those that:

- Make it difficult for a victim to breathe
- Cover a significant portion of the body
- Involve the head, neck, hands, feet, or genitals
- Are caused by chemicals, electricity, or explosions

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**Why It Matters...**

- Of the more than 2 million burn injuries reported each year in the United States, about a quarter of them result in serious injuries, and approximately 10,000 people die of burns each year.
- Serious, extensive burns are among the most expensive and difficult injuries to treat.
- Even relatively minor burns can be painful, and burns that are treated with inadequate first aid can lead to infection.