

First aid for burns

Burns can be caused by flames, UV radiation, hot liquids (scalds), an electric current and some chemicals.

Injuries from burns vary greatly in their severity, ranging from minor wounds through to major life-threatening injuries. The best way of treating the burns will depend on the part(s) of the body burnt, and the size and depth of the burn.



Safety first for burns

The first thing to do is to make sure that both you and the victim are safe from the source of the injury. For example, in the case of an electrical burn, turn off the power source and do not touch the victim until you know the power has been turned off.

Call for help

In the case of a major burn, or if the person is unconscious or has difficulty breathing, call 000 for an ambulance.

If the person is unconscious, check whether they are breathing and have a pulse, and start cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) if necessary.

Stop the burning process

Put out the flames. For example, if someone's clothes are on fire, get them to 'stop, drop and roll', or cover the flames using a blanket or coat and roll the victim on the ground.

For chemical burns, brush off any chemicals on the skin first, using a cloth or brush (not your bare hands), then wash the area with lots of cold water.

Don't remove clothing that is stuck to burnt skin, but do remove burnt clothing where possible. For scalds, remove clothing that is soaked with hot liquid. Remove jewellery that might cause constriction, such as a ring or wristwatch.

Cool the burn wound

Cool the burn wound as soon as possible. This is best done using cold running water from a tap. Generally, this should be done for about 20 minutes or until the pain eases.

Take care, especially with burns to a large area, that the person does not become too cold (hypothermic). This can be avoided by applying cold water only to the burnt areas, and keeping the rest of the person warm.

Do not use ice or iced water, because it can deepen the damage from the burn.

It is best to begin cooling immediately, but if this is not possible there is still some benefit if started within 3 hours of the injury.

Medical help for burns

The burn should be covered with a clean, non-stick dressing or clean cloth while you wait for medical help. Medical advice should be sought in all cases, except for very minor burns.

Last Reviewed: 06/05/2011

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