

# A burning issue:

## How to handle household burns

Accidental burns can happen just about anywhere in your home, and they're not always caused by fire. Hot objects or liquids, friction, the sun, electricity, or certain chemicals can also cause burns.

Each year, about a half-million people nationwide seek medical attention for burns. Household burns lead to nearly 7 of 10 admissions to burn centers. The good news is that the number of deaths from severe burns has dropped by more than half over the past 4 decades, in large part because of treatments developed through NIH-funded research.

Burns result in skin or tissue damage. The severity of a burn depends on the area it covers and how deep the damage goes. First-degree burns affect only the thin top layer of skin. Second-degree burns include the thick lower layer of skin. A third-degree burn is the most serious; it penetrates the entire thickness of the skin, permanently destroying it and the tissue that's underneath.

You can care for most minor burns at home. If the burn is red and painful with mild swelling or little blistering, then it's a first-degree or minor second-degree burn.

See a doctor if the burn is dark red and looks glossy with a lot of blistering. These are signs of a deep second-degree burn. Get immediate treatment if the burned skin is dry and leathery, perhaps with white, brown, or black patches. These are signs of a third-degree burn.

Burns can become infected with bacteria or other germs if protective layers of skin are lost. Burns can also lead to painful inflammation, as your immune system shifts into gear.

### FIRST AID FOR BURNS

#### For minor burns:

- Immerse in fresh, cool water or apply cool compresses for 10 to 15 minutes.
- Dry the area with a clean cloth. Cover with sterile gauze or a non-adhesive bandage.
- Don't apply ointments or butter; these may cause infection.
- Don't break blisters.
- Over-the-counter pain medications may help reduce inflammation and pain.

#### Call emergency services (911) if:

- Burns cover a large area of the body
- Burns affect the entire thickness of skin
- The victim is an infant or elderly
- The burn was caused by electricity, which can lead to "invisible" burns

