

Patient information from BMJ

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Burns (minor)

Minor burns can be very sore. They happen when you burn the top layers of your skin. Minor burns usually heal well and don't leave a scar.

You can use our information to talk to your doctor or pharmacist and decide which treatments are right for you.

What are minor burns?

Minor burns damage only the upper layers of skin. The deeper layers are undamaged. Minor burns are divided into:

- superficial burns (such as severe sunburns). These affect only the very top layer of skin, called the epidermis. You may hear these called first-degree burns.
- partial thickness burns. These extend into the second layer of skin, called the dermis. A burn into the dermis is more serious and will cause blisters. These are called second-degree burns.

It's very common for children to have accidents that lead to burns. Many children get injured at home by boiling water from pans, very hot drinks, such as freshly brewed coffee, or hot surfaces such as irons or oven doors.

It's important to keep an eye on young children in the kitchen, especially when you're cooking or making hot drinks.

Older adults are often burned by hot water or by cooking accidents.

What are the symptoms?

Minor burns are bright pink or red, and may blister. They feel very sore. If you touch the pink or red area, your skin may go white under your finger.

Even a light touch can hurt when you've burned your skin. The affected part may start to swell up.

If the burn reaches the second layer of skin (a second-degree or partial thickness burn), you will get blisters within a few hours. Blisters are pockets of skin filled with a clear fluid.

Burns (minor)

What should you do?

If your burn is very small, you may be able to treat it at home. Otherwise, you should see a doctor.

Always seek immediate medical attention if you or your child has:

- a deep or large burn, or
- a burn on the face/head, hands, feet, or genital area.

It's not always easy to spot a deep burn, because they don't hurt. That's because the nerves that carry pain are damaged.

A deep burn is more likely if you've been burned by something very hot: for example, if you've pressed a hand against an iron or immersed part of your body in boiling water. Deep burns are often white and the skin looks waxy.

We've included some first aid tips that may help limit the damage from a minor burn.

First aid for minor burns

Here are some dos and don'ts to help limit the damage after a burn.

- Cool the burn immediately by putting it under a running tap for up to 20 minutes.
- You can also immerse it in a bowl of water, or use a spray or a sponge.
- Wet towels don't work as well, because they warm up when next to the skin.
- The water you use should be tepid, not too cold.
- Do not use ice. Ice could cause more damage to the skin.

If you have burned your arm or leg, keeping it raised will help prevent swelling.

- Take off any jewelry or watches near the burned area. It could get too tight if the area swells up.
- Take off any clothing on the burned area after you have cooled it down. But don't pull off clothing that is stuck to the skin.

If you need to see a doctor, cover the burn before you go. Plastic wrap can keep the wound clean until you get to the doctor. But don't wrap it around your arm or leg. It will get too tight if the area swells up.

- Put one layer of wrap on the wound.
- You can keep the wrap in place with tape, but don't get tape on the wound.
- Don't cover your burn with anything sticky (such as adhesive bandage) or fluffy (such as cotton balls).
- Don't put grease like fat, lard, or butter on your burn.
- Don't put any cream or ointment on the burn.

Minor burns can be very sore. Simple painkillers like acetaminophen or ibuprofen can help ease the pain.

Burns (minor)

Don't burst any blisters at home. Sometimes doctors open up large burn blisters with sterile scissors, to help them heal. But if you try to do this yourself, you could infect the burn and cause more damage.

Treatments

There are a few main steps to treating a minor burn. If the burn is very small, you may be able to do these things at home. Otherwise, you should see a doctor.

- The burn will need to be cleaned carefully with water and a mild soap.
- To help prevent infection, the burn should be covered in an ointment that kills bacteria (an antibacterial ointment).
- The burn should be covered with a sterile dressing to keep it clean. There are different types of dressing used for minor burns. One of the most common is a simple gauze dressing.

You may also need to have a tetanus shot, if your vaccinations are not up to date.

As your burn heals, you will need to regularly clean the wound with mild soap and water and reapply the dressing. Your doctor can advise you on how often you should do this. Often, doctors recommend doing this once a day for minor burns.

What will happen to me?

Most minor burns and scalds heal within a couple of weeks. They usually don't leave a scar, even if the skin has blistered.

Burns that blister the skin sometimes get infected. A burn may be infected if:

- it seems to be getting worse (for example, you notice new redness, swelling, or tenderness)
- you feel sick to your stomach or feverish
- the burn starts to leak pus, or
- you notice an odor.

If any of these things happen, or if you have any other questions or concerns, you should see your doctor.

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