Emergency Care for Burns

With consistent safety precautions, most people experience few burns in their lifetime. In the event you do have a burn, do you know the immediate steps to take? The American Burn Association and the American Red Cross have established guidelines of emergency care for burns.

- **Stop the burning process.** Remove all clothing from around the burn area – these will retain heat, increasing the damage to the skin. If the material sticks to the skin, cool the area with cool water and seek medical attention. Jewelry and metal such as belt buckles and zippers also need to be removed.

- **Run cool (not cold) water** over the burn area for a few minutes.
  - Do not apply ice to the burn. Ice can make the burn worse.
  - Do not apply creams, ointments, or salves.
  - Do not use butter or oils on burns.
  - Do not break any blisters until seen by a physician.

- Cover with a clean, dry cloth.

- **First and Second Degree** burns can usually be treated at home. Keep the area clean to prevent infection by gently washing with mild antimicrobial soap several times a day. Rinse thoroughly. Cover open areas with a clean, loose dressing.

- Consult with your family physician or local burn center if the burn does not heal in two to three days or signs of infection appear. The service provider should talk to the consumer's physician about pain relief and for guidance regarding the application of topical over-the-counter preparations such as Aloe for first degree burns and some second degree burns.

- **Burns larger than the size of the person's palm should be evaluated by a physician.**

- For larger burns (bigger than the person's palm) or a burn that involves the eyes, face, airway, hands, feet or genital area, **CALL 911**.

- **Electrical burns** may be caused by household current, power lines, certain batteries, or lightning. All electrical burns should be seen by a physician; damage might not be immediately obvious.
  - Protect yourself. Do not touch the electrical burn victim until you are sure the power and plugs have been disconnected.
  - Once the victim is free from the electrical source, treat the burns as described above.
  - Electricity can cause the heart and breathing to stop. If the person is in distress, **CALL 911**. CPR or other emergency measures may be necessary.

- **Chemical burns** can be caused by contact with many household cleaners, lawn products, fresh cement, or other chemicals. As with electrical burns, chemical burns should be seen by a physician because damage might not be immediately obvious.
  - Gently brush any dry chemicals off the skin.
  - Rinse affected area with running water for at least 20 minutes or as advised by emergency personnel.
  - If the affected area continues to burn, continue to rinse until the pain stops.
o If eyes are affected, continue to flush until help arrives.
o Remove any contaminated clothing.

- **When Should You Seek Medical Attention?**
o All burns on the face, hands, feet, major joints, or genital area should be considered serious and need to be evaluated by a physician.
o Burns occurring in an enclosed space such as a house or car may result in smoke inhalation and persons should be evaluated for the effects of inhalation.
o Burns to the skin that are white, gray, leathery, or painless should be considered serious.

*Burns are categorized by degrees as described below:

As illustrated in the table below, the treatment of burns depends on the depth, area and location of the burn. A first degree burn is superficial and has similar characteristics to typical sunburn. The skin is red in color and sensation is intact. In fact, it is usually painful. Second degree burns look similar to the first degree burns; however, the damage is now severe enough to cause blistering of the skin and the pain is usually somewhat more intense. In third degree burns, the damage has progressed to the point of skin death. The skin is typically white and without sensation.

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<th>Burn Degree</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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| First       | - Minor damage to the skin similar to sunburn  
- Skin is dry without blisters  
- Color is pink to red  
- Painful  
- Generally heals in 3-5 days with no scarring |
| Second      | - Skin is moist, wet, and 'weeping'  
- Blisters are present  
- Significant swelling (edema)  
- Color is bright pink to cherry red  
- Very painful  
- Generally heals in 10-21 days |
| Third       | - Destroys all layers of the skin  
- May involve fat, muscle, and bone  
- Charred veins may be present  
- Color may be very bright red or dry and leathery, charred, waxy, white, tan, or brown  
- Person is unable to feel touch in areas of injury  
- May require skin grafting for healing |
Additional information
To learn more about emergency treatment for burns and other burn injury issues, go to:

The American Red Cross
www.redcross.org

Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation
www.aarbf.org

American Burn Foundation
www.ameriburn.org