

Minor burns and scalds

Information for patients

This leaflet can be made available in other formats including large print, CD and Braille and in languages other than English, upon request.

This leaflet tells you about minor burns and scalds, how to assess (judge how severe they are) and treat them. It will also help you decide whether you need to go to a hospital Accident and Emergency Department for treatment.

What are burns or scalds?

Burns happen when your skin is exposed to:

- heat, for example, flames, hot surfaces or sunlight
- chemicals, for example, battery acid, strong household cleaners.

Scalds are caused by hot liquids.

How severe is my burn or scald?

The severity of burns and scalds is judged by:

- how deep your skin is affected
- how much of your skin is affected.

Burns are divided into 3 degrees.

- 1st degree burns affect only the top layer of your skin. Your skin will be red and tender to touch but there are no blisters, for example, mild sunburn.
- 2nd degree burns cause slightly deeper damage, but the deeper layers of your skin are intact. You will see blisters and burst blisters. The burnt or scalded area may weep clear fluid.
- 3rd degree burns are much more serious. Here the full thickness of your skin is damaged. Your skin may be white or even blackened or feel hard to the touch. You may not be in any pain because your nerve endings have been damaged. **You must** go to the Accident and Emergency Department **immediately, not a walk-in centre**. You may need to be admitted to hospital for treatment.

What should I do if I get burnt or scalded?

You should immediately try to cool the area down. Hold the affected area under a tap or shower for 10 - 20 minutes. Have the water cool, not ice cold. Let the water run gently. This will reduce the pain quickly and reduce the damage done to your skin.

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If your skin is burnt by a chemical, rinse the area for at least 20 minutes.

Remove your clothing from the affected area. However, if your clothes are stuck to the burnt skin, **you must not** try to remove them.

If possible, remove any rings, bracelets or watches from the affected area, however, do not try to force them off.

Once the area has been cooled down or rinsed, wrap a cold compress, for example, a clean wet tea towel, around it. If you need to go to Accident and Emergency wrapping the area in layers of cling film can help. (Place cling film in layers, rather than round like a bandage to prevent it causing pressure if the area becomes swollen).

If the burn was caused by a chemical try to bring the container or the name of the chemical with you.

Take painkillers, as instructed by your doctor, for example, paracetamol, 2 tablets 4 times a day. Take **no more** than 8 tablets in 24 hours. **Do not** take paracetamol with any other medicines that contain paracetamol.

Do not:

- put antiseptic cream, butter or oil on the burn
- puncture any blisters
- try to remove clothing if it is stuck to your skin.

Do I need to go to hospital?

If the burn is 1st degree only and affects a small area you can treat it at home. Small superficial (surface) burns can be either left open or covered with a dry, non-adhesive (sticky) and non-fluffy dressing.

If you have a 2nd degree burn with small blisters (in an adult less than the size of a 50p coin), these can be treated in the same way as a 1st degree burn.

You should go to an Accident and Emergency Department if you have:

- large blisters
- 3rd degree burns
- burns affecting your face, hands, feet or private parts.

You must take a baby or small child (pre-school age) with any burns or scalds to your nearest Accident and Emergency Department.

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If you have a burn from electricity you should go to Accident and Emergency Department, even if the burn is tiny. The damage to your tissue may be much deeper than it seems.

What will happen in hospital?

A doctor or nurse will assess how severe your burn or scald is. He or she will check the depth and the area affected and decide if your burn or scald can be treated with dressings, or if further treatment is needed.

If there are large or tense (full) blisters, your doctor or nurse may puncture them to make you more comfortable. **You must not** try to burst any blisters yourself.

Most burns and scalds are minor and only need dressing and painkillers.

Your doctor or nurse will need to know if you have had a tetanus vaccination (injection) in the last 10 years. You may need a booster. Antibiotics are not usually needed unless the burn or scald is old or infected.

Your doctor or nurse may ask you to come back to the Accident and Emergency Department or Minor Injuries Unit in 2 days for a check-up, or you may be referred to a burns centre.

What should I do when I go home?

Leave any dressing undisturbed and keep it dry and clean. If you do get it wet return to Accident and Emergency Department to have it changed.

If the burn or scald is on your arm or leg try and keep it elevated (raised) for about 2 days, to help reduce any swelling.

Take painkillers when you need them. Paracetamol and ibuprofen usually help when taken as instructed by your doctor, for example, paracetamol, 2 tablets 4 times a day. Take **no more** than 8 tablets in 24 hours. **Do not** take paracetamol with any other medicines that contain paracetamol.

Always check the list of ingredients of other medication.

Do not take ibuprofen if you are allergic to it or to aspirin; if you have a stomach ulcer, asthma or if you are pregnant.

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How long will it take to heal?

This depends on the depth of your burn.

- 1st degree burns may peel after a few days and tend to heal within a week
- 2nd degree burns may take up to 3 weeks to heal
- 3rd degree burns are usually treated in hospital and the time they take to heal will vary greatly depending on how severe they are.

Will I have a scar?

- 1st degree burns do not usually leave a scar
- 2nd degree burns do not usually leave a scar as long as they do not become infected. There may be discolouration of your skin for several months, but this will eventually fade.

Do not expose this area to sunlight in the first 6 months without using a high factor sunscreen, for example, factor 30 or higher, to protect your new skin.

- 3rd degree burns usually leave a scar.

Contact numbers

If you need further advice, or have any problems, please contact:

- your GP during normal surgery hours. Outside surgery hours, you should contact your GP's surgery for the GP Out of Hours Service number.

Further information is available from:

NHS Choices

telephone: 111 (when it is less urgent than 999)

Calls to this number are free from landlines and mobile phones

or via the website at www.nhs.uk

Information used in the development of this leaflet

www.cks.nice.org.uk

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This leaflet has been produced in partnership with patients and carers. All patient leaflets are regularly reviewed, and any suggestions you have as to how it may be improved are extremely valuable. Please write to the Quality Assurance Team, University Hospital of North Tees or email: patientinformation@nth.nhs.uk.

Comments, Concerns, Compliments or Complaints

We are continually trying to improve the services we provide.

We want to know what we're doing well or if there's anything which we can improve, that's why the Patient Experience Team is here to help.

Our Patient Experience Team is here to try to resolve your concerns as quickly as possible. If you would like to contact or request a copy of our PET leaflet, please contact:

telephone: 01642 624719
Monday – Friday, 9.00 am – 4.00 pm
Messages can be left on the answering machine and will be picked up throughout the day.

freephone: 0800 092 0084
Mobile: (can use text): 0779 561 883
Email: patientexperience@nth.nhs.uk

Out of hours if you wish to speak to a senior member of Trust staff, please contact the hospital switchboard who will bleep the appropriate person.

telephone: 01642 617617
24 hours a day, 7 days a week

The Patient Experience Team is available to discuss your concerns in person Monday – Friday, 1.30 pm – 4.30 pm.

Data Protection and use of patient information

The Trust has developed a Data Protection Policy in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1988 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. All of our staff respect this policy and confidentiality is adhered to at all times. If you require further information please contact the Head of Communications.

telephone: 01642 624339 or www.dataprotection.gov.uk

University Hospital of North Tees, Hardwick, Stockton-on-Tees. TS19 8PE
University Hospital of Hartlepool, Holdforth Road, Hartlepool. TS24 9AH

Telephone: 01642 617617

Fax: 01642 624089