

What you should know about skin burns.

Burns are injuries to the skin and underlying tissues that can lead to pain, blister, swelling and loss of skin. They are usually caused by heat from fire, steam, or hot liquids. However, they may also result from chemicals (acids), ultraviolet radiation (sun exposure), radiation and electricity.

Q: How are burns classified?

A: Burns are classified as minor, moderate, or severe. This classification is based on two factors; a) depth of the burn and b) total area burned.

a) Burn Depth. The depth of injury from a burn is described as first, second, or third degree:

- **First-degree burns** affect only the top layer of skin (epidermis). They are red, swollen, and painful. The burned area whitens when lightly touched, but does not develop blisters.
- **Second-degree burns** extend into the middle layer of skin (dermis). They are pink or red, swollen, and painful, and they develop blisters that may ooze a clear fluid. The burned area may whiten when touched.
- **Third-degree burns** extend through all three layers of skin (epidermis, dermis, and fat/muscle). These burns also harm the sweat glands, hair follicles, and nerves. They are usually not painful because the nerves have been destroyed. The skin becomes leathery and may be white, black, or bright red. The burned area does not whiten when touched.

b) Burn Area

- **Minor burns:** All first-degree burns as well as second-degree burns that involve less than 10% of the body surface usually are classified as minor.
- **Moderate and severe burns:** Burns involving the hands, feet, face, or genitals, second-degree burns involving more than 10% of the body surface area, and all third-degree burns involving more than 1% of the body are classified as moderate or severe.

Q: What is the best treatment for burns?

A: First-aid measures at home may be all that is necessary to treat small, shallow burns that are clean. Running cold water over the burn can help relieve pain. In general, a clean burn is one that affects only clean skin and that does not contain any dirt particles or food. Additionally, covering the burn with an over-the-counter antibiotic ointment and a nonstick, sterile bandage can help prevent infection.

If the burn has the following traits you should consult a physician for immediate treatment:

- The burn is larger than the size of the person's open hand
- Blisters appear at the site of the burn
- The burn involves the face, hand, foot, genitals, or skin folds
- The wound is not entirely clean
- Pain persists longer than one day after the burn

Q: What are the complications of a burn?

A: Minor burns are usually superficial and do not cause significant complications. First- and some second-degree burns heal in days to weeks without scarring. Second-degree and third-degree burns can cause scar tissue to form. Deep second-degree and small third-degree burns take weeks to heal and usually cause scarring. Severe Burns may need to be treated in a university burn center and often require skin grafting. Severe burns (and some moderate burns) can cause serious complications due to extensive fluid loss and tissue damage. These complications may take hours or days to develop.

If you've experience a superficial burn that you think needs professional treatment, call Dermatology Associates of the Lowcountry today at (843) 689-5259 (Hilton Head) or (843) 705-0840 Bluffton/Okatie.