

BURNS ALL TOO COMMON THIS TIME OF YEAR

PROTECT YOURSELF FROM INJURY AND KNOW WHAT TO DO WHEN ONE OCCURS, WRITES DR. JESSICA SHIH



DR. JESSICA SHIH
 Column

Many people are surprised to learn that plastic surgeons take care of burn wounds.

Throughout my many years of training and practice as a plastic surgeon, the holiday season has always been bittersweet for me. I cherish the time with family and friends, but also know that with all of the distractions and stresses that come during this time of year, so too do the burn accidents.

The ringing of my pager (yes, we still use those in health care) brings about feelings of dread as so frequently these burns are terrible tragedies, and nearly all of them avoidable.

So what should you do when this happens?

The first step is to do our best to avoid accidents in the first place; this includes keeping hot drinks away from table edges and well out of reach of small children, using proper oven mitts when cooking with an oven, and being extra careful when cooking with hot oil as these burns are often the most severe. Still, accidents do happen — so what do you do when a burn happens?

If you or a loved one sustain a burn, run the area under cool running water (not cold) for a full 20 minutes. This has been shown to improve healing and scarring outcomes. It is important that you do not apply ice, toothpaste,

butter or creams to the burned area.

After cooling, see if there are visible signs of a deeper burn that requires professional help. This includes blistering, skin breakage or loss of the outside layer of skin, discoloration of the wound including deep red, purple, white, yellow, or charcoal.

Any signs of infection including redness, increased pain, swelling or discharge also warrants immediate medical attention. If any of these signs are present, cover the wound with a clean gauze or towel and seek immediate medical attention.

It is worth noting that the depth of the burn may not fully reveal itself for several days. If there is redness to the skin, but it is not broken or blistered within the first several days, the burn is likely first degree or reasonably superficial.

These burns typically heal within a week, and the area can be soothed with aloe vera or petroleum jelly.

"If you or a loved one sustain a burn, run the area under cool running water (not cold) for a full 20 minutes."

If the area begins to blister, the burn is at least second degree for which you should seek medical attention. These burns require appropriate dressings, especially once the blisters are broken, to avoid infection and allow for optimal healing. Do not attempt to break the blisters yourself.

Once assessed by a medical practitioner, the best way to keep these wounds clean is to wash them with basic soap and running water, apply an antimicro-

bial dressing, ointment, or cream as prescribed by your doctor and cover with clean gauze. Superficial second degree or partial thickness burns generally heal within one to three weeks with minimal scarring, but can also lead to pigmentation changes in the skin.

Deeper burns that do not heal within three weeks may require further intervention such as skin grafting, which is why it is important to seek medical attention right away to ensure your burn is appropriately treated.

If you are unsure about the nature of a burn, do not hesitate to seek medical help.

With a few preventive measures, you can help reduce the risk of burns this holiday season.

From my family to yours, we wish you very happy holidays and new year.

Dr. Jessica Shih is a double board-certified plastic and reconstructive surgeon with the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, and the American Board of Plastic Surgery. She can be reached at drshih@burlingtonplasticsurgery.ca.

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