



How to Treat a Burn From Grilling and Cooking

Best steps to take, and what you should never do

By Hallie Levine
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Grilling season is also burn season. Maybe the fat on your rib-eye steak caught on fire, singeing your hand, or you touched the grill cover to see whether it was hot—only to learn that it was.

Your first inclination in such circumstances might be to reach for a home remedy, such as butter or ice. But that's unwise.

“If you choose the wrong do-it-yourself treatment, you can increase the risk of worsening the burn, and up the chance of infection and scarring,” explains Eunice M. Singletary, M.D., a clinical associate professor of emergency medicine at the University of Virginia Health System in Charlottesville.

Here's what you need to know to treat a burn at home safely and effectively and when to seek emergency help.

Cool It and Check It

Remove any clothing and jewelry on or near the burn, and immerse the affected area in cool water for 15 to 20 minutes. That dissipates heat, reduces pain, and minimizes swelling around the burn, says Melissa Piliang, M.D., a dermatologist at the Cleveland Clinic. Then check the burn to determine whether you need to see a doctor. But don't apply ice. It slows blood flow to the area and can damage tissue further.

Protect the Burn

Clean it gently with soap and water, then cover it with a nonstick gauze bandage. A piece of clean cotton material (not cotton balls) or kitchen cling wrap will also work. Shielding the burn is key, not only to reduce the risk of infection, but “because even a mild breeze or puff of air on the burn in the first few hours can be painful,” Singletary says.

Ease the Pain

Taking an over-the-counter nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory such as ibuprofen (Advil and generic) or naproxen (Aleve and generic) will not only ease pain but also help reduce inflammation and aid healing, especially in the first 24 hours after burning yourself.

Applying aloe-vera gel may also help be soothing. But don't apply either butter or milk. The fat in butter will slow the release of heat from your skin, making the pain worse. And while some people think the protein in milk promotes healing, that's untrue, says Gary Goldenberg, M.D., an assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City. In addition, the bacteria in the milk could multiply and trigger a skin infection.

Fight Infection

The most important step is covering the wound as soon as possible. You can also dab on a little honey, which is anti-inflammatory and antibacterial, and contains fatty acids that help repair damage to skin, Piliang says.

In fact, a study published in the *Journal of Cutaneous and Aesthetic Surgery* found that minor burns that were treated with honey healed faster than those treated with silver sulfadiazine cream, which is sometimes prescribed to help prevent infection.

But don't bother with OTC antibiotic creams. They usually aren't necessary, and overuse of them could contribute to resistance of bacteria to antibiotics.

Also skip antiseptic agents such as hydrogen peroxide and white vinegar, which can cause severe pain when applied to burned skin, Goldenberg says. The same holds true for toothpaste, which contains potentially irritating ingredients, including calcium and peppermint.

Be Wise About Blisters

If a small blister forms a few hours after your injury, leave it alone. That natural bandage helps guard against infection. Touching or puncturing the blister makes the burn more vulnerable to germs, even if it's covered by a bandage. But if the blister is bigger than your thumbnail, go to an urgent-care clinic or an emergency room.

When to Get Medical Help

See a doctor as soon as possible if a burn extends deep into skin and blisters immediately (a third-degree burn) or goes through to muscle or bone (fourth-degree). Such burns may not cause pain, because of damage to the nerves.

In other cases, seek medical care if the burn:

- Involves the face, fingers, feet, genitals, or hands; is on or near a joint; encircles a body part; or is bigger than 3 inches in diameter.
- Happens to someone younger than 5 or older than 70.
- Seems infected (increasing redness, pain, a puslike discharge, or temperature is above 100.4° F).