

Burn Care Guidelines for 2nd and 3rd Degree Burns

Follow the instructions in this handout to care for your 2nd and 3rd degree burns at home.

2nd Degree Burns

Second degree burns appear open, shiny, moist, blistered, and pink or red. These burns are painful and sensitive to touch. They may be treated at home, in the clinic or in the hospital. Second degree burns often take 1-3 weeks to heal.

3rd Degree Burns

Third degree burns appear dry or leathery, white, brown, maroon, dark red or black. These burns are not sensitive to pain. Third degree burns often take greater than 3 weeks to heal or need skin grafting. These burns are treated at home only if they are quite small.

Pain Control

Take prescribed pain pills 1 hour before dressing changes. You can also use regular or extra strength Tylenol[®] (acetaminophen) to treat pain as needed. As your burn heals, you will have less pain. It may feel stiff or like it is being pulled as it heals. Only use ibuprofen if your burn doctor approves.

Burn Care Treatment

Avoid using ice on a burn as it decreases blood flow and prevents healing. Your burn care depends on the dressing used. Follow the burn care treatment instructions for the type of dressing that is checked below.

- ☐ Bacitracin or Silvadene[®] dressing
- ☐ Mepilex[®] AG dressing

Bacitracin or Silvadene[®] Dressing

Follow these instructions if you have this type of dressing.:

1. Remove the dressing. **Do not soak** to remove. Take off the dressing when it is dry. This helps to clean away dead tissue.
2. Wash burns gently **once a day** with unscented, antimicrobial soap. **Do not** use baby soap or soaps with lotion in it. Wash off the antibiotic cream/ointment, blisters, and loose skin. Rinse well. A small amount of bleeding is normal.
 - **For face burns:** Wash your face **twice** daily.
3. Remove the antibiotic cream/ointment from jar with gloves or washed hands so germs do not get in the jar.
4. Apply a **thin layer of Bacitracin or Silvadene[®]** antimicrobial cream or ointment to the burn as directed.
 - **For face burns:** Apply Bacitracin antibiotic ointment **twice** a day, and more often if your face gets dry. No gauze is needed on the face. Shave facial hair once a day.
 - **For ear burns:** Apply Bacitracin antibiotic ointment **twice** a day. **Do not** get cream/ointment in the ear canal. It may build up and plug the ears.
5. Apply a non-stick gauze called Cuticerin[™].
6. Wrap all burns except the face and ears with non-stretch roller gauze. You may need extra layers of gauze if the wound is weepy.
7. Apply Tubigrip[®], compression stockings, or glove.

Mepilex® AG Dressing

Mepilex® AG is a protective silver foam dressing that helps your burn heal, prevent infection, and control pain. Follow these instructions if you have this type of dressing.

1. **Do not** remove your dressings. Your dressings may stay in place for many days and will be removed by the nurse at a clinic visit.
2. Keep your dressing clean, dry, and in place. **Do not soak** dressings in water during shower or bath. Consider sponge bathing.
3. Contact the burn clinic if your dressings get wet, soiled, or displaced.

Prevent Swelling

Compression and elevation prevent swelling, promotes healing and helps with pain.

- **For face or head burns:** Elevate your head when you sleep.
- **For hand or arm burns:** Rest your hand or arm on pillows above the level of the heart.
- **For foot and leg burns:** Keep feet and legs up on pillows when you sit or are in bed. Keep your heels off the edge of the pillow.

Exercise

It is important to exercise even with a burn. Be sure to:

- Keep joints moving and to stretch new skin.
- Keep moving and walk often.
- Use your burned arm or leg.

Smoking

If you smoke, we encourage you to stop. Smoking decreases blood flow and oxygen to new and healed burns and slows down the healing process.

Diet

It is important to eat a well-balanced diet that is high in protein to help wounds heal. Drink plenty of fluids with extra protein, 8-10 (8 oz.) glasses in 24 hours, to prevent dehydration.

Healed Skin

Once your skin heals, use moisture creams to prevent drying and cracking. Healed skin appears shiny pink. **Avoid** creams with alcohol or numbing agents. Only use creams that are perfume and dye-free such as:

- Lubriderm®
- Eucerin®
- Nivea®

When to Call

Call the doctor if you have any signs of infection such as:

- Redness (about 1 inch in width) and swelling around the burn
- Foul smelling drainage from the wound
- Flu-like symptoms:
 - Fever greater than 100.4°F (for adults) or 101.5°F (for children) for two readings taken 4 hours apart by mouth
 - Chills
 - Nausea/vomiting
 - Muscle aches
- Increased pain that doesn't go away after using prescribed medicine.

Who to Call

If you have questions, please contact your provider through MyChart or call your provider listed in your After Visit Summary or After Hospital Care Plan. For a list of UW Health Clinics, visit

www.uwhealth.org/.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 10/2025 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#4573.