

First Aid: Chemical Exposure



Some chemicals cause burns. Others may be absorbed through the skin or lungs, causing hidden damage. If possible, always refer to the particular chemical's Safety Data Sheet or contact the Poison Control Center (800-222-1222) for expert advice. In general, follow the steps below.

Step 1. Stop the source

- Remove the person from contact with the chemical spill, airborne particles, or fumes. (Wear gloves or use other safety equipment as needed to protect yourself from exposure to the chemical.)
- Take off any clothes or jewelry that have been in contact with the chemical. Chemical injuries, just like heat burns, get worse as long as the source is in contact with the body.

Step 2. Clear the lungs

- Take the person to fresh air. This may mean going into another room or leaving the building.
- Do CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation), if there is no pulse or breathing.

Step 3. Flush the eyes

- Flush the affected eye with water for at least 15 minutes. Make sure the water is cool, especially if its source is an outside hose or eyewash station.
- Don't accidentally flush chemicals into an unaffected eye. Hold the head so that the injured eye is on the bottom. Flush from the nose downward.

Step 4. Clean the skin

- Brush water-activated chemicals, such as lime, from the skin, instead of using water. Be careful not to brush particles into the eyes.
- If the chemical does not react with water, flush the affected skin with cool water for at least 15 minutes. Make sure the water flow is not forceful enough to cause pain or break blisters.
- Don't brush away chemicals with your bare hands.

When to call your healthcare provider

Chemicals may cause serious damage not only to the outside of the body, but also to the inside. If absorbed into the blood, chemicals may start a silent attack on the kidneys or liver. Call your healthcare provider right away if any of the following is true:

- A chemical has come into contact with the eyes, nose, or mouth.
- The Safety Data Sheet calls the chemical hazardous or likely to cause damage.
- The container label warns of corrosive contents, which can wear away skin.

Call 911

Call 911 right away if the victim has:

- Symptoms of shock
- Trouble breathing
- Burns over a large area

While you wait for help

- Reassure the person.
- Do cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), if there is no pulse or breathing.

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