

# Introduction to First Aid



Medically reviewed by [Deborah Weatherspoon, Ph.D., MSN](#) — Written by Linda Hepler, RN on November 5, 2018

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## Introduction to first aid

At any moment, you or someone around you could experience an injury or illness. Using basic first aid, you may be able to stop a minor mishap from getting worse. In the case of a serious medical emergency, you may even save a life.

That's why it's so important to learn basic first aid skills. To build on the information you learn here, considering taking a first aid course. Many organizations offer first aid training, including the [American Red Cross](#) and [St. John Ambulance](#).

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## Definition of first aid

When you provide basic medical care to someone experiencing a sudden injury or illness, it's known as first aid.

In some cases, first aid consists of the initial support provided to someone in the middle of a medical emergency. This support might help them survive until professional help arrives.

In other cases, first aid consists of the care provided to someone with a minor injury. For example, first aid is often all that's needed to treat minor

burns, cuts, and insect stings.

## 3 steps for emergency situations

If you encounter an emergency situation, follow these three basic steps:

### 1. Check the scene for danger

Look for anything that might be dangerous, like signs of fire, falling debris, or violent people. If your safety is at risk, remove yourself from the area and call for help.

If the scene is safe, assess the condition of the sick or injured person. Don't move them unless you must do so to protect them from danger.

### 2. Call for medical help, if needed

If you suspect the sick or injured person needs emergency medical care, tell a nearby person to call 911 or the local number for emergency medical services. If you're alone, make the call yourself.

### 3. Provide care

If you can do so safely, remain with the sick or injured person until professional help arrives. Cover them with a warm blanket, comfort them, and try to keep them calm. If you have basic first aid skills, try to treat any potentially life-threatening injuries they have.

Remove yourself from danger if at any point in the situation you think your safety might be at risk.

## First aid bandage

In many cases, you can use an [adhesive bandage](#) to cover minor cuts, scrapes, or burns. To cover and protect larger wounds, you might need to apply a [clean gauze pad](#) or [roller bandage](#).

To apply a roller bandage to a wound, follow these steps:

1. Hold the injured area steady.
2. Gently but firmly wrap the bandage around the injured limb or body part, covering the wound.
3. Fasten the bandage with sticky tape or safety pins.
4. The bandage should be wrapped firmly enough to stay put, but not so tightly that it cuts off blood flow.

To check the circulation in a bandaged limb, pinch one of the person's fingernails or toenails until the color drains from the nail. If color doesn't return within two seconds of letting go, the bandage is too tight and needs to be adjusted.

## First aid for burns

If you suspect that someone has a [third-degree burn](#), call 911. Seek professional medical care for any burns that:

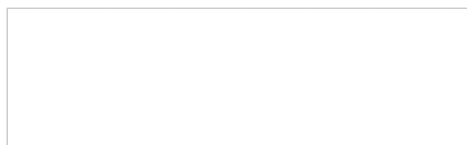
- cover a large area of skin
- are located on the person's face, groin, buttocks, hands, or feet
- have been caused by contact with chemicals or electricity

To treat a minor burn, run cool water over the affected area for up to 15 minutes. If that's not possible, apply a cool compress to the area instead. Avoid applying ice to burned tissue. It can cause more damage.

Over-the-counter pain relievers can help relieve pain. Applying [lidocaine](#) or an [aloe vera gel](#) or cream can also reduce discomfort from minor burns.

To help prevent infection, apply an [antibiotic ointment](#) and loosely cover the burn with clean gauze. [Find out when you should contact a doctor for follow-up care.](#)

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## First aid CPR

If you see someone collapse or find someone unconscious, call 911. If the area around the unconscious person seems safe, approach them and begin CPR.

Even if you don't have formal training, you can use hands-only CPR to help keep someone alive until professional help arrives.

Here's how to treat an adult with hands-only CPR:

1. Place both hands on the center of their chest, with one hand on top of the other.
2. Press straight down to compress their chest repeatedly, at a rate of about 100 to 120 compressions per minute.
3. Compressing the chest to the beat of "Staying Alive" by the Bee Gees or "Crazy in Love" by Beyoncé can help you count at the correct rate.
4. Continue performing chest compressions until professional help arrives.

[Learn how to treat an infant or child with CPR and how to combine chest compressions with rescue breathing.](#)

## First aid for bee sting

For some people, a bee sting is a medical emergency. If a person is having an allergic reaction to a bee sting, call 911. If they have an epinephrine auto-injector (like an EpiPen), help them find and use it. Encourage them to remain calm until help arrives.

Someone who's stung by a bee and showing no signs of an allergic reaction can usually be treated without professional help.

If the stinger is still stuck under the skin, gently scrape a credit card or other flat object across their skin to remove it. Then wash the area with soap and water and apply a cool compress for up to 10 minutes at a time to reduce pain and swelling.

To treat itching or pain from the sting, consider applying [calamine lotion](#) or a paste of [baking soda](#) and water to the area several times a day.

[Get the information you need to recognize and treat other types of stings and bites.](#)

## First aid for nosebleed

To treat someone with a nosebleed, ask them to:

1. Sit down and lean their head forward.
2. Using the thumb and index finger, firmly press or pinch the nostrils closed.
3. Continue to apply this pressure continuously for five minutes.
4. Check and repeat until the bleeding stops.

If you have nitrile or vinyl gloves, you can press or pinch their nostril closed for them.

If the nosebleed continues for 20 minutes or longer, seek emergency medical care. The person should also receive follow-up care if an injury caused the nosebleed.

[Learn when professional care is needed for a nosebleed.](#)

## First aid for heatstroke

When your body overheats, it can cause heat exhaustion. If left untreated, heat exhaustion can lead to heatstroke. This is a potentially life-threatening condition and medical emergency.

If someone is overheated, encourage them to rest in a cool location. Remove excess layers of clothing and try to cool their body down by doing the following:

- Cover them with a cool, damp sheet.
- Apply a cool, wet towel to the back of their neck.
- Sponge them with cool water.

Call 911 if they develop signs or symptoms of heatstroke, including any of the following:

- nausea or vomiting
- mental confusion
- fainting
- seizures
- a fever of 104°F (40°C) or greater

If they're not vomiting or unconscious, encourage them to sip cool water or a sports drink. [Take a moment now to learn about other strategies to help someone with heat exhaustion or heatstroke recover.](#)

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## First aid for heart attack

If you think someone might be experiencing a heart attack, call 911. If they've been prescribed [nitroglycerin](#), help them locate and take this medication. Cover them with a blanket and comfort them until professional help arrives.

If they have difficulty breathing, loosen any clothing around their chest and neck. Start CPR if they lose consciousness.

## First aid kit for babies

To prepare for potential emergencies, it's a good idea to keep a well-stocked first aid kit in your home and car. You can buy preassembled [first aid kits](#) or make your own.

If you have a baby, you might need to replace or supplement some of the products in a standard first aid kit with infant-appropriate alternatives. For example, your kit should include an infant thermometer and infant acetaminophen or ibuprofen.

It's also important to store the kit in a place where your baby can't reach it.

Ask your pediatrician or family doctor for more information about infant-friendly first aid.

## First aid kit list

You never know when you might need to provide basic first aid. To prepare for the unpredictable, considering storing a well-stocked first aid kit in your home and car. It's also a good idea to have a first aid kit available at work.

You can buy preassembled first aid kits from many first aid organizations, pharmacies, or outdoor recreation stores. Alternatively, you can create your own first aid kit using products purchased from a pharmacy.

A standard first aid kit should include:

- adhesive bandages of assorted sizes
- roller bandages of assorted sizes
- absorbent compress dressings
- sterile gauze pads
- adhesive cloth tape
- triangular bandages
- antiseptic wipes
- aspirin
- acetaminophen or ibuprofen
- antibiotic ointment
- hydrocortisone cream
- calamine lotion
- nitrile or vinyl gloves
- safety pins
- scissors
- tweezers
- thermometer
- breathing barrier
- instant cold pack
- blanket
- first aid manual

It's also smart to include a list of your healthcare providers, emergency contact numbers, and prescribed medications in your first aid kits.

## Outlook

It's important to protect yourself from contagious illnesses and other hazards when providing first aid. To help protect yourself:

- Always check for hazards that could put your safety at risk before approaching a sick or injured person.
- Avoid direct contact with blood, vomit, and other bodily fluids.
- Wear protective equipment, such as nitrile or vinyl gloves when treating someone with an open wound or a breathing barrier when performing rescue breathing.
- Wash your hands with soap and water immediately after providing first aid care.

In many cases, basic first aid can help stop a minor situation from getting worse. In the case of a medical emergency, first aid might even save a life. If someone has a serious injury or illness, they should receive follow-up care from a medical professional.

Last medically reviewed on November 5, 2018

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## How to Make a Splint

Medically reviewed by William Morrison, M.D. — Written by Debra Stang —  
Updated on August 27, 2018

[Materials you'll need](#) | [Applying a splint](#) | [Hand splints](#) |  
[When to see a doctor](#) | [Takeaway](#)

### What's a splint?

A splint is a piece of medical equipment used to keep an injured body part from moving and to protect it from any further damage.

Splinting is often used to stabilize a [broken bone](#) while the injured person is taken to the hospital for more advanced treatment. It can also be used if you have a severe [strain](#) or [sprain](#) in one of your limbs.

Placed properly, a rigid splint will help ease the pain of an injury by making sure that the wounded area doesn't move.

If you or a loved one is injured at home or during an activity, such as hiking, you can create a temporary splint from materials around you.

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## What you'll need for splinting an injury

The first thing you'll need when making a splint is something rigid to stabilize the fracture. Items you can use include:

- a rolled-up newspaper
- a heavy stick
- a board or plank
- a rolled-up towel

If you're using something with sharp edges or something that might cause [splinters](#), such as a stick or board, be sure to pad it well by wrapping it in cloth. Proper padding can also help reduce additional pressure on the injury.

You'll also need something to fasten the homemade splint in place. Shoelaces, belts, ropes, and strips of cloth will work. Medical tape can also be used if you have it.

Try not to place commercial tape, such as duct tape, directly against a person's skin.

## How to apply a splint

You can follow the instructions below to learn how to apply a splint.

### 1. Attend to any bleeding

Attend to [bleeding](#), if any, before you attempt to place the splint. You can stop the bleeding by putting pressure directly on the wound.

### 2. Apply padding

Then, apply a bandage, a square of gauze, or a piece of cloth.

Don't try to move the body part that needs to be splinted. By trying to realign a misshapen body part or broken bone, you may accidentally cause more damage.

### 3. Place the splint

Carefully place the homemade splint so that it rests on the joint above the injury and the joint below it.

For example, if you're splinting a forearm, place the rigid support item under the forearm. Then, tie or tape it to the arm just below the wrist and above the elbow.

Avoid placing ties directly over the injured area. You should fasten the splint tightly enough to hold the body part still, but not so tightly that the ties will cut off the person's circulation.



#### 4. Watch for signs of decreased blood circulation or shock

Once the splinting is completed, you should check the areas around it every few minutes for signs of [decreased blood circulation](#).

If the extremities begin to appear [pale](#), [swollen](#), or [tinged with blue](#), loosen the ties that are holding the splint.

Post-accident swelling can make the splint too tight. While checking for tightness, also [feel for a pulse](#). If it's faint, loosen the ties.

If the injured person complains that the splint is causing pain, try loosening the ties a little. Then check that no ties were placed directly over an injury.

If these measures don't help and the person is still feeling pain from the splint, you should remove it.

The injured person may be experiencing [shock](#), which might include them [feeling faint](#) or taking only [short, rapid breaths](#). In this case, try to lay them down without affecting the injured body part. If possible, you should elevate their legs and position their head slightly below heart level.

#### 5. Seek medical help

After you've applied the splint and the injured body part is no longer able to move, call 911 or your local emergency services. You can also take your loved one to the nearest urgent care clinic or emergency room (ER).

They'll need to receive a checkup and further treatment.

### Splinting the hand

The [hand](#) is an especially difficult area to immobilize. Here are some tips for making your own hand splint.

#### 1. Control any bleeding

First, treat any [open wounds](#) and control any bleeding.

#### 2. Place an object in the palm of the hand

Then place a wad of cloth in the palm of the injured person's [hand](#). A washcloth, a ball of socks, or a tennis ball can work well.

Ask the person to close their fingers loosely around the object.

#### 3. Apply padding

After the person's fingers are closed around the object, loosely place padding between their fingers.

Next, use a large piece of cloth or gauze to wrap the whole hand from the fingertips to the wrist. The cloth should go across the hand, from the

thumb to the pinkie.

#### 4. Secure the padding

Finally, secure the cloth with tape or ties. Make sure to leave the fingertips uncovered. This will allow you to check for signs of poor circulation.

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Once the hand splint is on, seek medical attention at an ER or urgent care center as soon as possible.

### When to contact a medical professional

You should seek immediate medical help should any of the following conditions occur:

- bone protruding through the skin
- an open wound at the injured site
- loss of pulse at the injured site
- [loss of sensation](#) in the injured limb
- [fingers](#) or [toes](#) that have [turned blue](#) and lost sensation
- [a feeling of warmth](#) around the injured site

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### The takeaway

When faced with an emergency injury, your first action should be arranging proper medical attention for the injured person.

While waiting for qualified help or to assist with transportation, a homemade splint can be effective [first aid](#).

You must, however, carefully follow instructions so that your splinting doesn't make the injury worse.

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