NIH News in Health

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Handling Household Burns Send us your comments ■ En español

just about anywhere in your

home, and they're not always

caused by fire. You might get

A Burning Issue

December 2013

Accidental burns can happen

burned by spilling coffee in your lap, touching a hot iron, or misusing certain cleaning products. Burns are skin or tissue damage, usually caused by heat. Burns can be caused by hot objects or

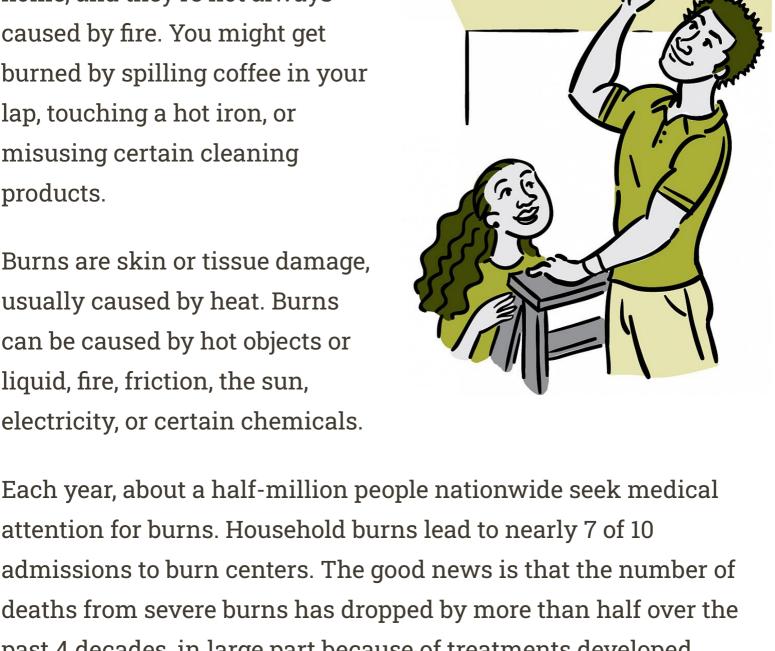
liquid, fire, friction, the sun,

electricity, or certain chemicals.

Each year, about a half-million people nationwide seek medical attention for burns. Household burns lead to nearly 7 of 10 past 4 decades, in large part because of treatments developed through NIH-funded research.

that's underneath.

burn.



painful with mild swelling or little blistering, then it's a first-degree or minor second-degree burn. See a doctor if the burn is dark red and looks glossy with a lot of blistering. These are signs of a deep second-degree burn. Get immediate treatment if the burned skin is dry and leathery, perhaps

with white, brown, or black patches. These are signs of third-degree

Burns can become infected with bacteria or other germs if

inflammation, as your immune system shifts into gear.

protective layers of skin are lost. Burns can also lead to painful

You can care for most minor burns at home. If the burn is red and

The severity of a burn depends on the area it covers and how deep

skin. Second-degree burns include the thick lower layer of skin. A

third-degree burn is the most serious; it penetrates the entire

thickness of the skin, permanently destroying it and the tissue

the damage goes. First-degree burns affect only the thin top layer of

"The immune system response is intended to limit the area of injury and to remove any bacteria," says Dr. Ronald G. Tompkins, chief of the burn unit at Massachusetts General Hospital. "But sometimes this immune reaction can lead to further harm to the area damaged by the heat." Proper burn care can help avoid additional damage.

Emergency treatment for third-degree and some second-degree

burns may include a blood transfusion and/or extra fluids to help

maintain blood pressure. Grafting-placing healthy skin on top of

the burn wound—might help promote new skin growth. Severe burns can lead to widespread inflammation, organ failure, and **shock**. This sometimes-deadly response can arise a week or two after the initial burn. But doctors can't tell beforehand which patients might develop this extreme reaction. Tompkins and other

NIH-funded scientists are looking for ways to predict and prevent

You can take steps to avoid household burns. Never leave cooking

food unattended on the stove. Set your water heater's thermostat to

120 °F or lower to prevent scalding burns. And install smoke alarms

shock and organ failure after burns or trauma.

on every floor of your home. Keep yourself and your family safe from unexpected burn injuries. **Wise Choices** Links First Aid for Burns Burns

reduce inflammation and pain.

Call emergency services

burns cover a large

area of the body.

burns affect the entire

thickness of skin.

the victim is an infant

(911) if:

For minor burns:

minutes.

Immerse in fresh, cool

water, or apply cool

Dry the area with a

adhesive bandage.

Don't apply ointments

or butter; these may

cause infection.

Don't break blisters.

Over-the-counter pain

medications may help

compresses for 10-15

clean cloth. Cover with

sterile gauze or a non-

or elderly. the burn was caused by electricity, which can lead to "invisible" burns.

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