

# PROTECTING YOUR CHILD FROM BURNS



**As many as 1,300 South African children (new-born babies included) die from burn-related injuries every year. Here's how to make sure your child doesn't become part of this statistic.**

According to Suretha Breedt, the Unit Manager at [Life Cosmos Hospital](#) in Witbank, most of the burns that land South Africans – adults and children alike – in hospital can be prevented.

Prevention is all the more critical when you consider the factors that place children at particular risk for burn injuries. Children's skin is thinner than that of adults, so something that might hurt you just a little could result in serious injury for your child. Added to this, children's curious natures, combined with their relatively limited mobility, mean that they are exposed to many potential dangers. As a result even newborns are at risk of burns.

## Types of burn hazards:

- **Hot drinks:** These are dangerous for toddlers: imagine an inquisitive little hand reaching up to a

table to see what's inside a mug and upsetting that mug – filled with hot liquid.

- **Paraffin:** Most burns in South Africa come about because of exposure to this highly flammable substance, as the plethora of headlines relating to the shocking number of shack fires attests.
- **Heaters and fireplaces:** These are equally likely to cause problems, which is why it's vital that heaters are used correctly. They should never be covered, for instance, or left on all night.
- **Bath water:** Mothers of newborns are vigilant about testing the temperature of a bath but that vigilance may wear off a little as their children become independent and are able to get in and out of the bath by themselves. They might do this before the temperature of the water is correct and accidentally burn themselves.

## What to do to avoid burns

### Be aware at all times

The first step in burn prevention is ensuring awareness. Look around for hazards from a child's perspective. For example, are the pots on the stove

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angled with their handles pointing outwards, which is easy for a toddler to pull down? Are lighters or matches within easy reach? Are all cables and electrical cords tucked away? Is your cup of coffee balancing precariously on the edge of a table?

1. **Never leave your child unattended**

Make sure that there is adult supervision for your child at all times especially when near an open fire such as a braai.

2. **Educate your children**

Teach your children about these dangers as soon as they are old enough to understand. Parents often feel as if they are endlessly repeating the phrase 'don't touch' but your child needs to know that items that may be hot to the touch are off limits – and that there are consequences if this rule is ignored.

3. **First-aid course**

Attend a first-aid course so that you know how to respond in case of emergency.

**Steps to take when your child has burns**

- **Do not over cool the infected area** even though your instinct will be to make the area as cold as possible. You also need to resist the urge to remove all clothing or materials stuck to the burn.
- **Rinse the infected area** with cool water for at least 20 minutes, Suretha says.
- **Apply ointment or gel** to treat smaller wounds (the size of the patient's palm). An example is a cooling gel such as Burnshield.

**When to see a doctor**

'If the burn is larger than the size of the child's palm, or if it begins to blister immediately, urgent medical assistance is required,' says Dr Dawid Roux of [Life Cosmos Hospital](#).

'Burns caused by electric shock should also be seen by a doctor as soon as possible', he adds, as these may cause internal injuries. Smoke inhalation is also considered serious. Even small burns may require medical intervention if they appear infected so make sure your doctor takes a look.

WORDS BY LISA WITEPSKI

*The information is shared on condition that readers will make their own determination, including seeking advice from a healthcare professional. E&OE.*

References:

1. Adapted from *Life Healthcare* magazine. (2019). 'The Burning Truth' by Witepski, L., p42-43. Adapted with permission.

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