

Summer Wound Care

For many people across the country, Memorial Day weekend marks the unofficial start of summer. This means bike rides, bonfires, camping, swimming, boating, and other summer activities. Because of the warmer weather and people spending more time outdoors, there is typically an increase in minor scrapes, cuts, and burns in the summer months.

Alyssa Smolen, an OSF HealthCare family medicine and wound care APRN, discusses tips for treating minor wounds at home – and when to see a doctor. Smolen says the first step when treating any wound is to thoroughly wash the area. And while many people have that well-known brown bottle of hydrogen peroxide in their medicine cabinets at home to use for cuts and scrapes, she says that simply using soap and warm water will suffice for most superficial wounds.

“The number one thing people are surprised by is when I tell them they shouldn’t be using things like peroxide or iodine to clean wounds. Most people think that is kind of basic, standard wound care. But really you can cause more harm and delay wound healing by using those harsh types of cleaners,” says Smolen.

Once the wound has been thoroughly cleaned, Smolen says that keeping the wound moist in the early stages is important so the injury heals from the inside out rather than from the outside in. She recommends keeping a bandage on it for the first day or two until it starts to scab over and to change the bandage daily.

If the wound starts to heal but seems to be drying out, Smolen recommends using something topical to keep it moist – but says to try to avoid antibiotic ointment, as it is not typically needed for minor wounds.

“Antibiotic ointment probably isn’t necessary unless there is concern for an infection. If it’s a really dirty wound where there is a lot of dirt in it or you were swimming in a lake or something, then you would maybe need an antibiotic ointment – but most wounds do not require an antibiotic ointment. We do want to make sure it stays moist, so actually just using some Vaseline or something can be just as effective as antibiotic ointment,” Smolen explains.

Some wounds obtained from outdoor summer fun mishaps that are not as superficial may require stitches. Smolen says that time is important if stitches are needed and to not delay seeking treatment.

“If it’s been more than 12 hours, that is usually an absolute no, we can’t stitch it – and then you just have to let it heal by what we call secondary intention. It takes longer sometimes, and often leaves a worse scar. So I think if you have something that might need stitches, it never hurts to get it checked out early on rather than wait,” says Smolen.

Smolen adds that summer wounds that are sometimes misunderstood are blisters. Blisters can occur more frequently during the summer because of the extra outdoor activities, from wearing new outdoor shoes without breaking them in properly, or from burns caused by grilling or bonfires. While a blister does not necessarily bleed and is not an open wound, Smolen says it is still very important to let it heal properly so it does not open or become infected.

“It’s recommended not to pop a blister. The skin that is over the top of the blister and the fluid can actually serve as kind of its own band aid, so I would usually just leave them open to air. If it’s in a place where it’s likely to pop on its own or be irritated, you can try using some of the felt-like pads that you can get at a drug store to kind of pad the area around the blister to protect it,” Smolen advises.

If you cut or scrape your skin outdoors where the wound may get dirty, if the wound is deep, or if the object that punctured your skin may not have been clean, a [tetanus shot](#) may be needed. Tetanus is an infection that occurs when certain bacteria enter the body, and staying up-to-date on this vaccine will help prevent these infections from occurring.

“Usually, recommendations are to have an updated tetanus shot every 10 years unless you have a wound that’s dirty – so examples would be a rusty nail, barbed wire, or just being outside and getting dirt in the wound could put you at risk for tetanus. Recommendations are to have an updated tetanus shot within 5 years if you have a dirty wound. If you have a dirty wound and know you just had a tetanus shot last summer for example, you should be good to go,” says Smolen.

If you or your child obtains a superficial wound this summer, it is important to treat it as soon as possible and follow the tips offered by Smolen to so that the wound heals properly.

If you think it may be infected, or if the wound may require stitches, go to the closest immediate care center, find an [OSF OnCall Urgent Care](#) near you, or head to your local emergency department.