

Safe at home

Top emergencies and how to handle them

About 26,000 people wound up in the emergency room after injuring themselves with a chain saw in 2007. OK, you could have seen that coming. But more than twice that many people hurt themselves with handheld garden tools. And 250,000 people visited the hospital after injuring themselves on a can or container; another 476,000 after a run-in with a chair, sofa, or sofa bed. The numbers aren't here to scare you, just to remind you that sometimes bad things can happen when you use everyday products—even harmless-looking stuff like balloons, batteries, and, yes, bagels. Those three items are linked to thousands of injuries every year: choking on balloons, serious cuts when slicing bagels, and burns from batteries. Having the right first-aid supplies and know-how can make all the difference. Here's a guide to handling the most common home injuries. After you've put together an emergency kit using our advice on page 36, keep this article nearby!

EMERGENCY

Falls

How to handle them

Don't automatically help someone up. Ask the victim to lay still. If she has lost consciousness, shows signs of a head injury (see below), is in extreme pain, or has trouble moving any body parts, call 911. Even if she appears fine, follow up with a medical professional to check for internal injuries if the victim is elderly or has tumbled from a distance greater than her height. We'll cover bleeding a bit later; here are tips for handling other minor injuries related to falling.

■ **Scrapes.** Clean with soap and water, making sure to flush out all debris. Dab on triple-antibiotic ointment (Neosporin or a generic version) and cover with a bandage. See your doctor if the area becomes red, swollen, or warm or throbs with pain, all signs of infection.

■ **Bruises.** Apply direct pressure for a few minutes and then add a frozen gel pack—a frozen bag of peas or corn also works—to reduce swelling and pain. Leave it on for 20 minutes and wait 20 minutes before reapplying.

■ **Strains and sprains.** For wrist, ankle, or other joint injuries, think RICE: Rest, apply Ice to the affected area, Compress it with an elastic bandage, and Elevate it above the heart to allow blood to drain away and reduce swelling. A painkiller such as ibuprofen (Advil or generic) might help.

How to prevent them

Make your home as fall-proof as possible. Keep floors and stairs clear of clutter, tape down wires so you don't trip on them, and make sure thresholds and walkways are well lit. Also consider getting rid of throw rugs. To stay safe on a ladder, place it on a firm, level surface and make sure all safety locks are engaged.

JAMES LYNN/ICONICA/GETTYIMAGES

Falls are the No. 1 source of accidental injury in the home and the leading cause of death from injury for people age 65 and older.



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Severe allergic reactions

How to handle them

Serious systemic reactions usually occur suddenly, within minutes after contact, and can be life-threatening. As many as half are caused by food allergies. Watch for danger signs that warrant a call to 911, including swelling of the face or in the mouth or throat, nausea or abdominal cramps, dizziness or confusion, and difficulty breathing.

How to prevent them

Anyone who is extremely allergic to something (and is aware of it) should carry three things: an antihistamine, a prescription device (Epi-Pen) that can inject the drug epinephrine in an emergency, and a card stating what she is allergic to. Self injectors can be hard to use, and research suggests that many people who should use them don't, in part because they're not sure how. If you carry one of those devices, have your doctor show you how to use it, practice on an orange, and teach someone who's often with you. To prevent bad reactions to bee, hornet, or wasp stings, ask your doctor about allergy shots.



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Head bumps

How to handle them

Each year in the U.S. about 660,000 people suffer a traumatic brain injury when they fall or hit their head. Here are the signs that indicate someone needs immediate medical attention.

- A severe headache that doesn't improve after taking acetaminophen (Tylenol or generic).

- Neurological symptoms such as confusion, weakness, numbness in any part of the body, slurred speech, difficulties with vision, or dizziness.

- Excessive drowsiness or difficulty waking up from sleep.

- Unequal pupils.
- Nausea or vomiting.
- Blood or clear fluid coming from the nose or ears.

How to prevent them

Wearing a helmet while biking slashes your risk of head injury by 85 percent. And although adults might strap helmets on their kids, only 44 percent wear one themselves, according to a poll by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. For advice on choosing and fitting a helmet, download "Which Helmet for Which Activity?" at www.cpsc.gov.

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Choking

How to handle it

Well-meaning bystanders often try to assist someone who's choking but can still breathe by raising her arms or banging on her back. That might work, but the Heimlich maneuver is preferable if someone is awake and alert, and you can get behind her and deliver the upper-abdominal thrust quickly. If the victim can cough, encourage her to keep doing so. If she can't make any sound, call 911 immediately and then administer first aid for choking. According to research, back blows, abdominal thrusts, and chest compressions are all equally effective, and using a combination is also useful. If you're alone and choking, call 911 immediately, from a landline if possible,

and leave the line open so that emergency personnel can find you.

How to prevent it

"You see balloons at parties all the time, but they are one of the leading causes of product-related deaths in young children," says Kim Dulic, of the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Children can suffocate while blowing up a balloon or chewing popped balloon pieces because if latex pieces are inhaled, they can become molded to the throat and lungs. Mylar balloons are a good alternative.

Other common hazards are marbles, coins, small balls, batteries, and any toy or part of a toy that could fit through a toilet-paper tube.

35% of all toy-related deaths occur as a result of choking, and in a third of those cases, balloons are to blame.

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Burns

How to handle them

Most people will run water on a burn for a minute or so, but that's not nearly enough to stop the burning that's still going on in deeper tissues, says Jeffrey Pellegrino, Ph.D., of the American Red Cross Advisory Council. He advises holding the burned area under a stream of cool water for up to 20 minutes. Don't use ice because extreme cold can further damage delicate tissue. And don't use butter or oily salves, which will seal in heat. Once the burn has cooled, protect it with triple antibiotic cream and a bandage. Blisters are Mother Nature's protection; breaking them increases the risk of infection.

If you are helping someone with a chemical burn, protect yourself, call for help if necessary, and have her take off any clothes with chemical residue and get to a sink, shower, or hose. Seek medical attention if burns cover an area larger than the victim's palm; are on the head, neck, or genitals; might interfere with movement (on the bottom of the foot, for example); or appear very deep.

How to prevent them

Too-hot tap water is one of the main causes of scalding, a problem easily remedied by lowering the temperature of your hot-water heater to 120° F. One hidden kitchen danger is overheating water in the microwave. Superheated water appears placid but will violently erupt out of the container when disturbed. To avoid that, use the stove for boiling water. Batteries are another risk because they can cause chemical burns. Don't let kids handle them. To reduce the odds that they will overheat and rupture, don't mix old and new batteries or different types and don't put them in backward.

32% of people admitted to burn centers have been scalded. But almost 4,000 people are treated annually for chemical burns caused by leaky batteries.





An estimated 3,000 people wind up in the emergency room each year after cutting themselves slicing bagels. Another 4,000 or so cut themselves while preparing chicken.

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Bleeding

How to handle it

Basic first aid for bleeding is simpler than instructions you might have been given in the past. “Direct pressure—not elevating the affected area or anything else—is what stops bleeding,” says Jeffrey Pellegrino, of the American Red Cross Advisory Council. Place gauze or a clean towel over the wound and press firmly, adding more layers if necessary. If the bleeding doesn’t stop within 5 minutes or so, seek medical help.

Our medical consultants say that over-the-counter powders and bandages containing chemicals to stop bleeding are a bad idea for home use. “If you’re bleeding so much that simple pressure won’t stop it, you need to be in the ER,” says Kathleen Cowling, M.D., vice president of the American College of Emergency Physicians. In general, if you

think a wound might need stitches, it probably does. See your doc if the edges of the cut don’t come together, the cut is longer than half an inch, or it’s on your face. Also, you might need a tetanus shot if you haven’t had one in the last 10 years.

How to prevent it

Sharp knives are safer than dull ones because they cut cleanly and are less likely to slip. Always use a cutting board, cut away from your body, and keep the fingers of the hand holding the food curled toward your palm and away from the path off the knife. Bagels are notoriously difficult to slice safely, so it’s worth buying a gadget just for them. Hand wash knives separately and store them in a knife block rather than a drawer, where they can cut fingers.

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Poisoning

How to handle it

If symptoms are severe, call 911. Otherwise, regardless of the age of the victim or the source of the poisoning, call a local poison control center at 800-222-1222. Program this number into your phone, post it on your fridge, and tell your baby-sitter. “Poison-control centers can tell you what to do at home and when you need to get further medical help,” says Kathleen Cowling, of the American College of Emergency Physicians. “They also provide continuity of care, so that if you do need to go to the hospital, the ER staff will already have your case file in front of them.” Skip the syrup of ipecac in your cabinet.

A Food and Drug Administration advisory panel recommended that this vomit-inducing drug be removed from the over-the-counter market because it doesn’t reliably remove poison from the stomach and can cause side effects such as lethargy, which can be confused with the effects of the poison.

How to prevent it

Almost all exposure to poisons—about 90 percent—occurs at home, and half the cases involve kids under 6. The most common sources include cosmetics and personal-care products, cleaners, and painkillers. To keep kids safe, don’t buy brightly colored or fruit-scented cleaners

that they could mistake for a fruit drink, and never transfer a chemical into a soda bottle or beverage container. Keep all chemicals, drugs, and vitamins locked away, even if they have child-resistant packaging. Child-resistant caps are not foolproof and they are only designed to protect children up to age 5.

Adults also fall victim to accidental drug poisoning. People have died of liver failure after taking two drugs containing acetaminophen, such as a multisymptom cold drug and a prescription painkiller. Check labels for active ingredients, follow dosing instructions exactly, and ask your doctor or pharmacist before combining medications.



EMERGENCY

Fainting



How to handle it

Sitting in a hot bath, a shock, the sight of blood, locking your knees while standing, even a coughing or laughing fit can cause your heart rate to slow or blood vessels to dilate, draining blood away from your head. Fainting is a nifty defense mechanism that quickly gets you into a position in which blood is restored to the brain. Passing out is usually not serious, but the fall can be. If you’re with someone who starts to topple, support her on her way down and raise her legs when she’s on the ground. Most people will regain consciousness within 3 minutes. If not, call 911. Even people who come to quickly should follow up with their doctor; fainting could indicate

an underlying problem such as anemia or a heart condition.

How to prevent it

Studies have shown that people who get woozy in stressful situations or when they stand up too quickly can keep from fainting with easy exercises that prevent blood from flowing to the arms and legs. The next time you feel light-headed, try these maneuvers.

- Clasp your hands across your chest and pull hard in opposite directions.
- Squeeze a ball, glove, wad of paper, or any other object in one hand.
- Cross your knees at the ankles while tensing thigh, stomach, and gluteal muscles.

Passing out is usually not serious, and it can happen to anyone. It’s the most common medical emergency on airplanes.

PILLS: CORBIS/PHOTOGRAPHY/VEER; FAUCET: STEVE WISBAUER/BRANDXPICTURES/GETTYIMAGES

Ready for anything Be superprepared

■ **Take a course.** The American Red Cross (www.redcross.org) and the American Heart Association (www.americanheart.org) offer courses in CPR and first aid.

■ **Try the Internet.** Online CPR instruction is a good refresher and, in a pinch, better than nothing. Find videos, apps, and printable guides from the University of Washington School of Medicine at www.depts.washington.edu/learnpr.

■ **Read a book.** Print out a free emergency manual at www.emergencycareforyou.org or buy “A Family Guide to First Aid and Emergency Preparedness” from the Red Cross for \$16.95.

Life-threatening reactions to stings occur in less than 1% of children but about 3% of adults.



EMERGENCY

Animal bites & stings

How to handle them

If you're stung by a bee, the best approach is to carefully scrape away the stinger in a side-to-side motion with a straight-edged object such as a credit card. But don't waste time trying to find your wallet! The key is to get the stinger out quickly. Use cold compresses, an over-the-counter hydrocortisone cream, and an antihistamine such as diphenhydramine (Benadryl or generic) to ease bug bites and stings. See your doctor if the swelling extends beyond the bite site; you might need prescription drugs. And be alert to signs of a severe allergic reaction.

Bites or scratches by dogs, cats, or

other pets should be cleaned extremely carefully with soap and water at home and then treated by a doctor. "Even small puncture wounds that don't look very bad can seed bacteria way deep and lead to infection," says Kathleen Cowling, of the American College of Emergency Physicians. Check with the pet owner to make sure the animal's rabies vaccination is up to date.

How to prevent them

Bees are attracted to flowers, so avoid looking or smelling like one: Don't wear bright colors or perfume to cookouts. And yes, swatting at a bee just ticks it off, so sit still and hope it flies away.

KIM TAYLOR & JANE BURTON/DORLING KINDERSLEY/GETTY IMAGES



EMERGENCY

Electrocution

How to handle it

If you encounter someone being electrocuted by an active, high-voltage power line, do not attempt a rescue. Instead, call 911 immediately. Even in your home, tread very carefully near electricity! Don't touch someone who is still connected to the current. Turning off an appliance might not stop the flow of electricity, so unplug it or turn off the circuit breaker. If you can't shut off the current, stand on dry, nonconducting material such as a rubber mat or a stack of newspapers and use a nonmetal object such as a wooden broom to push the victim away from the source.

Call 911 if the victim has extensive burns, was in contact with a high-voltage source, or shows any of the symptoms listed in the sidebar at right. If the person is unconscious or doesn't have a pulse, you might need to perform CPR. Even if she is conscious and seems OK, you should still seek medical attention. Electrical burns can cause serious internal injury that is not visible.

How to prevent it

The main source of electrocution at home is household wiring through a panel board, junction box, circuit-breaker switch, or electrical outlet. Tied for

second place are large appliances such as air conditioners and furnaces, and accidentally touching a power line with, say, a metal tool.

Outlets with a ground-fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) could prevent as many as two-thirds of the estimated 160 electrocutions and thousands of burns and electric shocks that occur in the U.S. each year. Those outlets are a must-have in bathrooms, kitchens, outdoors, and anywhere else that water is present. Electricians can easily install a GFCI; you can also purchase a GFCI circuit breaker that will protect all outlets serviced by that circuit.

If you don't have a GFCI outlet in your bathroom, it's especially important to buy appliances with a safety plug; that will protect you from electrocution if they accidentally drop into the toilet or a sink full of water. Curling irons and hair straighteners, for example, don't normally have safety plugs. Our advice: Don't do your hair in the bathroom if you don't have GFCI outlets. And when buying any electrical appliances, always look for a seal that indicates it is UL-, ETL-, or CSA-listed, which means that the product meets current safety standards.

PUT YOUR CELL PHONE ON ICE!

If you have emergency contacts listed under ICE (in case of emergency) in your cell-phone address book, first responders and ER personnel will know whom to call. Our experts suggest including more than one ICE listing—for example, ICE1-Mom and ICE2-Dad. Do it now, while you're thinking about it, and have all your family members do the same.

RAINUND KOCH/RISER/GETTY IMAGES

When to call 911

There is only so much you can—or should—handle at home. Seek medical help immediately if someone shows any of the following symptoms. If you're not sure, just make the call.

■ **Breathing difficulties such as shortness of breath.**

■ **Chest pain or pressure that lasts for more than a few minutes or recurs, which can indicate a heart attack.** Other signs that someone might be having a heart attack are pain or discomfort in one or both arms, back, neck, jaw, or stomach; breaking out into a cold sweat; or feeling nauseated or light-headed.

■ **Confusion or other neurological symptoms.** Those include weakness or difficulty walking, changes in vision, sudden dizziness or fainting, or any unusual behavior.

■ **Coughing or vomiting blood.**

■ **Sudden or severe pain.** That includes unusual abdominal pain or chest or upper abdominal pain that lasts more than 2 minutes or keeps recurring.

■ **Suicidal or homicidal feelings.**

■ **Nonstop vomiting or diarrhea.**

Skip the car ride and call 911 if the person's condition appears life-threatening or you suspect that moving her could cause further injury, if distance or traffic could cause delays, or if you need the skills or equipment of a trained first responder.



Just in case

What you need in your first-aid kit

Everyone should have a first-aid kit at home and in the car, plus a portable kit to take along when traveling. You can make your own with sample-size products tucked into a zippered plastic bag. Or you can buy kits that don't cost a lot of money but contain everything you might need, just in case. We bought a Johnson & Johnson kit with 170 items for about \$15—far less than it would cost to buy all the supplies separately. But

we especially liked the Red Cross Deluxe Family First Aid Kit (about \$25; www.redcrossstore.org). It's a compact case that unfolds into individual zippered compartments, each printed with basic first-aid steps for various types of injuries; the appropriate supplies are all tucked inside.

However, just a couple of boo-boos can wipe out those little packets of pain relievers and antibiotic ointment

in a premade kit, so stock up on extras of those common items. Be sure you keep your first-aid supplies neatly organized in one place, so that you don't waste time rounding them up when someone's hurt. And remember to restock when you use something up. It's also a smart idea to go through your kits every year to replace out-of-date medications. At right is a checklist of everything you should have on hand.

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MUST-HAVES

- First-aid handbook
- Disposable medical-exam gloves (preferably vinyl; some people are allergic to latex)
- Mouth-to-mouth device for rescue breathing
- Absorbent compress dressings
- Adhesive bandages in assorted sizes
- Sterile gauze pads
- Adhesive cloth tape
- Roller bandages
- Triangular bandages
- Safety pins or bandage closures
- Sharp scissors with rounded tips to prevent cuts
- Tweezers
- Triple-antibiotic ointment
- Hydrocortisone cream.
- Gel cold pack to keep in freezer (or instant cold compress)
- Thermometer (with extra batteries, if it uses them)
- Drugs; we recommend having the following medications in adult and child formulations: acetaminophen (Tylenol or

generic), ibuprofen (Advil or generic), aspirin (brand name or generic), antihistamine (Benadryl or generic), anti-diarrhea medicine (Imodium or generic), antacid (Tums or generic).

- Prescription medications and medical supplies
- Emergency contact information and medical history of each family member; blank forms available at Emergencycareforyou.org
- Sample-size or individual-use packets of meds and ointments you can pack in a travel kit, antiseptic wipes in case you're not near soap and water, and an emergency blanket

4 THINGS YOU DON'T NEED

- Syrup of ipecac.
- Chemical preparations to stop bleeding.
- Smelling salts.
- Tincture of iodine.



What to pack in your purse

- Adhesive bandages
- Antacids
- Antibiotic ointment
- Antiseptic wipes
- Pain reliever



Keep a full first-aid kit in your car and one at home in an easy-to-access spot, such as your kitchen.