

Burn Injuries: Helping Families Cope

When your child suffers a burn injury, you and your family may experience emotional, social and financial stress. This pamphlet gives answers to some common questions you may have about how to cope with the stress of your child's initial stages of burn treatment.

Your emotional stress

It is normal to have many questions and worries about your child's condition. When you arrive at the hospital, you will meet with many health care professionals to discuss the initial stages of burn treatment. Always remember that you are not alone in this process.

It is common for parents or caregivers of children with burn injuries to feel things like guilt, fear, anger, anxiety, helplessness or loss of control. Sometimes it is difficult to deal with all of these feelings at once. You may also have trouble sleeping and eating.

Coping with emotional stress

To cope with emotional stress, take care of yourself as best as you can. Try the following things to help you feel better:

- eat healthy food
- relax (a bath, a book, a massage, a walk)
- exercise
- sleep (take a nap while your child naps)

Spend time and talk with people that make you feel good:

- your nurse, who can also help you find others to speak with

- a counsellor you like (psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker)
- other families that have gone through the same thing
- family members that make you feel supported
- friends that make you feel supported

Guilt

You may experience feelings of guilt. Please remember that accidents do happen.

When you are feeling guilty:

- you may think about what happened over and over again, to see what you could have done to prevent it
- you may feel more guilt when you see your child in pain
- you may be concerned that others are judging you for allowing this to happen

These feelings are normal and it is often helpful to talk about them. Find out if there is a professional on your health care team at the hospital, like a social worker or a psychologist that you can talk to.

Trauma reactions

When something frightening happens to you or someone you love, it is normal for your body to have a trauma reaction. Some people have a trauma reaction when their child is injured, and others do not.

When you are having a trauma reaction you may experience the following:

- nightmares (may or may not be related to the injury)
- difficulty sleeping
- flashbacks of smells, visions, sounds or feelings related to the injury
- avoiding thinking about or feeling about the injury
- jumpiness, irritability, restlessness
- feeling numb or feeling dazed
- social withdrawal

These reactions are normal, and you usually feel better once you understand that your child is going to be okay. However, sometimes these symptoms continue. If these symptoms continue after a few weeks, make sure to talk to a member of your health care team, or your family doctor. A social worker or psychologist can help you cope with these symptoms.

Your child's emotional stress

After a burn injury, it is normal for your child to experience a lot of different feelings. It is common for children to feel anger, helplessness, fear, anxiety, hope, guilt, and shock. It is also possible for your child to have a trauma reaction.

When your child is having a trauma reaction he or she may experience the following:

- hyperactivity
- nightmares, or fear of going to sleep or sleeping alone
- regressive behaviours (thumb sucking, baby talk, bed-wetting)
- clingy, worried about parent leaving
- stomach aches and headaches or other hurts

- personality changes
- school difficulties
- fear of loss or death, and sometimes a fear of spirits or ghosts

Talk to a member of your health care team that can help your child cope with these reactions like a child psychologist, social worker, child life specialist, or play therapist. It is especially important to talk with a health care professional if the symptoms last longer than a few weeks after the injury.

Helping your child cope with pain

Sometimes your child will feel pain or anxiety while in hospital. It can be difficult for parents to know what to do. Your health care team knows how to help children cope with pain. Ask them about what you can do to help. If you feel uncomfortable during any situation it is okay to step out of the room.

Answering your child's questions

It can be hard to know what to say when your child asks questions about their burn injury. Here are some helpful tips:

- It is OK to say, "I don't know" to your child. Children ask hard questions, and learning that adults do not have all the answers is an important part of growing up. Because your child needs to feel like they can trust you, especially right now, you do not want to give wrong answers or make false promises.
- It is OK to talk openly about the burns with your child and with other people when your child is in the room. This teaches your child

that it is OK for them to talk about their burns too.

- When you answer your child's questions keep answers simple, honest and to the point.
- If you are unsure about what to say or what not to say to a child you can talk to a member of your health care team, like a social worker or a child life specialist.

Helping siblings cope with emotional stress

A childhood burn injury can be hard for the other children in your family.

Siblings may feel:

- worry about their brother or sister or about their parents being upset
- guilt about not protecting their sibling or about feeling ok when their sibling is injured
- loneliness because they may feel left out or forgotten
- anger or resentment towards their brother or sister or parents for not giving as much attention to them as before

It is important to provide support for siblings in this difficult time and show them that you care. You can help siblings cope with emotional stress by:

- spending one on one time with them when possible
- asking your children if they have any questions and remember to be simple, honest and to the point when you answer. It is okay to say that you "do not know."

- making sure your children know it was not their fault

If behaviour of your other children was related to the injury, talk to your health care team about how to discuss this with your children. It is important for parents and caregivers to help children understand the consequences of their actions, while helping children not to be too hard on themselves. Remind your children that accidents do happen and that you love them no matter what.

You and your partner

When a child suffers a burn injury, it is common for you to feel certain ways towards your partner. For example, you may feel angry towards your partner if they were caring for the child when the injury occurred. If you were caring for the child when the injury occurred you may feel like you let down your partner. These feelings are very normal.

Because these feelings may create conflict and tension in your relationship it is important to talk with a member of your health care team to help resolve these feelings.

Talking to family and friends

Your family and friends care about you and your child. It is natural for them to ask questions and want to visit your child at home. When talking to your family and friends about your child's burn injury, it is important to remember the following:

- Choose family members and friends that are supportive and make you feel comfortable.

- Answer questions and have visitors only when you feel ready.
- It is OK to answer questions truthfully.

Financial support

If you have a job but would like to stay in the hospital with your child, you can do the following:

- Talk to your employer about your needs.
- If you have benefits, talk to your insurance company.
- Talk to your health care team (social worker) to see if they have any suggestions.

If you need financial support, you can do the following:

- Ask your health care team (social worker) for suggestions.
- Contact your local government office.
- Think about which friends and family may be willing to help.

- Contact your spiritual or religious community.

Key points

Coping with your child's burn injury is not easy. It can cause emotional, social and financial stress.

- Talk to a member of your health care team like a social worker or psychologist to help cope with emotional stress
- Talk with family and friends that are supportive and make you feel comfortable
- Contact a social worker or local government office for financial support
- It is important to remember that you are not alone in this process. Your health care team is here to help you.

