

Burn Injury Alert

This Medical Update is based on the work of our Medical Review Subcommittee and should be posted prominently. We will make an effort to take an active role in improving the services provided to people with disabilities by communicating important issues found in the Medical Review Subcommittee's review of deaths and serious injuries. We want to thank you for your prompt reporting of deaths and serious injuries. You are helping us meet our mission.

Medical Update



This medical update is based on the work of our Medical Review Subcommittee (MRS) and our Medical Review Unit (MRU). The MRS and the MRU work to improve the services provided to persons with disabilities by communicating important issues found in the course of our reviews of deaths and serious injuries. We thank you for your prompt reporting of deaths and serious injuries. You are helping us to meet our mission.

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Burns are a form of traumatic injury caused by thermal, electrical, chemical, or radioactive agents. For burn injuries, the criteria for reportable serious injuries are those severe enough to be considered second or third degree burns. Most burn-related serious injuries reported to the Ombudsman's Office are thermal. Unprotected sun exposure (sunburns), hot water (bath, shower, sink), hot moist materials (such as moist or wet towels heated for treatment or therapy), and personal heating devices (such as a heating pad) account for the source of most thermal injuries.

Hot water burns often involve one or more of the following four factors:

- **Temperature of the water** - This is directly related to the maximum temperature settings on plumbing and household equipment. The temperature of water can be measured and equipment or devices can be adjusted accordingly. Equipment or devices that control the maximum temperature of the water should be periodically checked for proper functioning. Any indicated adjustment or maintenance should be done without delay. Maximum water temperatures of 120F have been shown to reduce hot water burns.
- **Length of time skin is exposed to hot water** - While some temperatures will cause a severe burn immediately, lower water temperatures can cause a severe burn if the skin is exposed for a sufficient length of time. Please note the "Scalds: A Burning Issue" information on the other side, which is included for your convenience and reference.
- **Integrity of the skin** - The skin of the very young and very old and damaged skin (healing wounds, diaper rash) are more susceptible to burn injuries.
- **Staff supervision** - Regardless of the setting, traumatic events often occur when staff are called upon to deal with an emergency situation elsewhere in the facility. While true emergencies cannot be predicted or scheduled, other factors can be identified and addressed. These include periodic and routine assessments of client vulnerabilities, periodic and routine review of the level of supervision the client requires, ongoing awareness of the entire environment, and striving to be vigilant against allowing one's familiarity with a client to supercede the need for constant, close supervision.

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Similar factors can be involved in thermal burns from hot moist materials and personal heating devices. Even when a device is functional and being used appropriately, even when hot moist materials are being used as prescribed or directed, the length of time the skin is exposed to heat can be the prime factor in both whether or not a burn occurs and in how severe a burn may turn out to be. In some cases, the severity of a burn may not be apparent until some time later. When symptoms of a burn injury are present (redness, mild swelling, pain, blisters, weeping of fluids) have the injury promptly assessed and treated by professional medical staff.

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