

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Steven L. Smith, DC

Safe and Natural First Aid

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is moving into the mainstream as more people embrace natural and safe methods of caring for their health. Exciting new CAM therapies continue to emerge for conditions like cancer, diabetes and heart disease. However, even the healthiest individual can harness gentle nature-based remedies for everyday minor injuries like cuts, burns, insect stings and bruises. Dr. Smith recommends looking to nature for gentle and effective relief for the bumps and bruises of life.



Cuts and Scrapes

From scraped knees on the playground to sliced fingers in the kitchen, minor wounds are common occurrences. While deep or gaping cuts may require stitches to heal properly, you can treat most minor cuts and scrapes at home with natural remedies to soothe the skin and ward off infection.

First, if the wound bleeds persistently, apply pressure and keep the injured area elevated for 20 to 30 minutes. Plain cool water is best for cleaning a cut or scrape, says Dr. Smith. Use a mild soap to wash away any dirt from the surrounding area, and use sterilized tweezers to carefully remove any debris in the wound.

After cleaning the wound, head to your kitchen cupboard for an effective

natural antibiotic — honey. Honey is an excellent treatment for cuts and scrapes. It kills bacteria and protects tender skin from sticking painfully to the bandage (*BMC Complement Altern Med* 2010;10:31). Honey is also uniquely safe in that, unlike antibiotic ointments, its use does not contribute to the growth of antibiotic-resistant bacteria (*Forsch Komplementmed* 2010;17:74-80).

Tea tree oil is another popular and effective natural treatment that kills bacteria and reduces inflammation. This ancient essential oil is receiving attention from modern medicine. It is used clinically to kill multi-resistant strains of bacteria (*J Craniomaxillofac Surg* 2009;37:392-7). Because some people's skin is sensitive to tea tree oil, Dr. Smith recommends applying this potent remedy sparingly or mixing it with organic olive oil.

Calendula, a cousin of the marigold, also has anti-inflammatory and antibacterial properties. Besides protecting cuts and scrapes from infection, calendula extract speeds healing by stimulating the growth of new tissue. An impressive recent study revealed that wounds treated with calendula were 90 percent closed after eight days, compared to 51 percent closure in the control group (*J Basic Clin Physiol Pharmacol* 2009;20:73-9).

Burns and Sunburns

Natural remedies are effective for most sunburns and other minor burns, including first-degree burns (affecting only the outer layer of skin) and second-degree burns (affecting the second layer of skin, often with blistering and intense pain) smaller than three inches in diameter. Larger second-degree burns and all third-degree burns (affecting and sometimes charring all layers of skin) require emergency medical attention to prevent permanent tissue damage.

The first response to minor burns is to draw heat from the burned skin. For a sunburn, try a cool bath or shower. Hold localized burns under cool running water or apply a cool compress for 10 to 15 minutes. Do not apply ice to a burn — this could cause further damage. Protect minor burns with a sterile bandage while healing.

Aloe vera gel is a popular and proven natural remedy for minor burns and sunburns. A comprehensive research review describes it as a powerful anti-inflammatory agent that speeds healing of first- and second-degree burns while relieving pain and decreasing blistering.



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Additional research indicates that aloe vera heals burns nine days faster than no treatment and three days faster than a common prescription medication for burns (*Burns* 2007;33:713-8; *Surg Today* 2009;39:587-91).

Some swear by apple cider vinegar as a sunburn remedy. Add two cups to a tepid bath or apply it to skin with a spray bottle. Indeed, acetic acid — the main component of vinegar — is well-documented as a bactericide that matches or betters many commercial antiseptics (*Burns* 2009;35:695-700).

Oatmeal is another sunburn antidote from the kitchen. Mix one cup of uncooked oatmeal into a bath. Scientists have pinpointed chemicals called avenanthramides as the anti-inflammatory, antioxidant compounds that give oatmeal its skin-soothing reputation (*Arch Dermatol Res* 2008;300:569-74).

Insect Bites and Stings

With well over a million insects for every human in the world — plus thousands of spiders — everyone is bound to get an occasional bite or sting. These are often irritating, but usually do not pose a serious threat — except in the case of severe allergies or bites from certain poisonous spiders.



In case of an insect sting, carefully remove the stinger with the edge of a credit card or tweezers, taking care not to squeeze the venom sac. Wash the affected area with mild soap and apply a cold pack to stings and bites alike to temper pain and swelling. If the person stung has a known allergy and has an epinephrine auto-injector (EpiPen), administer the epinephrine and get medical attention immediately.

If you are bitten by a spider, try to identify the spider — knowing what poisonous spiders live in your area is helpful. Should the perpetrator be a poisonous spider, get medical attention immediately. If you cannot identify the spider, treat as for an insect sting and watch for warning signs of toxicity such as swelling of the throat or lips, vomiting, rapid heartbeat or difficulty breathing.

A paste made by mixing water with baking soda or meat tenderizer is a popular home remedy for bites and stings. While there is little research into these methods, they follow sound scientific principles. Baking soda may neutralize the acidity of some insects' venom. The papaya enzyme in meat tenderizer is thought to break down the protein in venom just as it breaks down the protein in a tough piece of meat.

You can also use activated charcoal mixed with water to treat a bite or sting. Charcoal absorbs toxins quickly, making it a common clinical therapy for internal poisoning (*EXS* 2010;100:397-460).

Apis is a popular homeopathic therapy for stings and bites. As with all homeopathic remedies, apis works on the principal of “like cures like” to stimulate the body’s ability to self-heal. The active ingredient of apis is venom of the honeybee (*Apis mellifica*), and it is available as an ointment or a pellet to take orally. Research shows that apis effectively reduces swelling by as much as 28 percent (*BMC Complementary Altern Med* 2007;7:1).

Bruises and Sprains

Bruises and sprains are different types of injuries, but they respond well to similar natural remedies. A bruise is tissue damage beneath the skin when an impact breaks small blood vessels. A sprain is a tear in a ligament. Both injuries may result in pain and swelling. Reduce these by applying ice, elevating the injured area and resting. In the case of a sprain, stabilize the joint and compress it with an elastic wrap or bandage to speed healing. And, as with any injury, schedule a chiropractic checkup right away.

Ointment made of the herb comfrey is a proven natural treatment for bruises and sprains. Comfrey safely restores function and eases pain. And, research shows that it is more effective than the prescription NSAID diclofenac (*Aust J Physiother* 2008;54:7-20).

Distillate of witch hazel is an inexpensive and widely available remedy for swelling associated with bruises and sprains. Apply it to the injured area with a cotton ball for quick relief. Scientists have proven its ability to improve microcirculation, thus reducing inflammation (*Altern Med Rev* 2001;6:126-40).

Arnica, a homeopathic preparation, is also effective against swelling, muscle pain and bruising. Available in a topical cream or pellets, it is believed to work by flushing excess fibrin — a protein formed at the site of injury. A newly published investigation affirms that 20 percent arnica ointment outperforms placebo and vitamin K formulations in healing ankle sprains. Another study shows that patients who take arnica orally for bruising and swelling need markedly fewer other painkillers (*Br J Dermatol* 2010 Epub; *J R Soc Med* 2003;96:204-2).

Look to Chiropractic for Natural Solutions

Our chiropractic office understands that patients want information on natural alternatives to medication. That’s why we are committed to educating patients about the latest research. Want to learn more? Please ask us about our upcoming patient education programs.

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