

Burn awareness needs to be a priority

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More needs to be done to prevent burn injuries given that more than 200,000 people are accidentally burned, 20,000 are taken to hospital and 115 die every year from burns, according to Dr Peter Maltz, medical director of the burns unit at Concord Hospital in Sydney.

The most common causes of burns are hot water, ovens, stoves, open fires, heaters, matches and power points. Children and the elderly are the most affected and more 25 per cent of hospital admissions are made up of infants. Men also seem to be a risk group as there are 50 per cent more men seriously burnt than women.

In rural and remote Australia, burn injuries can be especially serious because specialised medical help is so far away. As a result the Department of Health & Ageing sponsored a Rural Health Education Foundation television program last month, 'Burn Injury

– Rural Perspectives', hosted by Dr Fiona Wood, head of the Royal Perth Hospital's burn unit and the 2005 Australian of the Year.

According to Dr Maltz, who helped put the program together, "one immediate thing that can be done to curb the toll is to install a thermostat control in our bathrooms to bring the water temperature or the tap down to 42 degrees celsius instead of 60 degrees, which is more commonly the case. We see some pretty bad burns on people who have slipped into hot baths before they've adjusted the water temperature," he said. "When you consider that your legs and bottom represent over 35 per cent of your body, the burns can be quite serious, particularly in elderly people and infants who have thinner and more fragile skin."

Dr Maltz added there are some simple, yet extremely important rules everyone needs to know as part of general first aid to deal with a burn.

"Number one is to stop the burning process. That may mean turning off the electricity or rolling the person on the ground to put out the flames.

"The second thing is to cool the wound. Cooling has to be for at least 20 minutes and must occur within three hours of the burn. Running the wound under cold water, ideally 15 degrees, is one option. However, as cold water can be a hard thing to find in the bush, I advise people to purchase a hydrogel dressing, which you can get from your chemist and keep handy in the first aid kit. These moist, specially packaged bandages work using evaporation to quell the burning process.

"Next, you have to wrap or cover the wound and get a health care professional to look at it.

"Burns cause horrific injuries. We as a society need to become more burn aware. We're working on new treatments but prevention is the key," Dr Maltz said.



Burns in infants and the elderly can be very serious.