First Aid in the Wilderness

The purpose of first aid is to keep the injured person alive and in as good condition as possible until professional medical help can take over. A Boy Scout who is good at first aid does not try to be a doctor and do too much; he simply does the right things quickly and efficiently.

All Scouts should study first aid thoroughly. Below are a few procedures that everyone going afield should know about. In fact, the outdoor person who knows this basic information can apply it at home, at school, at work—any time it is needed.

Severe Bleeding

Remove clothing around the injury so that you can see and work on the wound. Be fast, but be careful. The first thing you must do is stop the blood flow. Press your hand hard on the wound to hold the blood in while you get bandaging material.

If available, a large compress bandage from your first aid kit is best, but if it is not use the cleanest material available, such as a handkerchief, torn clothing, cloth of any kind. Your only purpose at this moment is to keep the blood in the victim's body.

While you are doing this, do not move the victim. If needed, add more compress bandages over the first one. If there are no broken bones, elevate the wound.

If the bleeding is from an arm or leg, press your hand firmly against the pressure point to slow blood flow. Then add even more bandages.

Once you are sure bleeding is under control, treat for shock. After you have done all you can, get professional medical help as soon as possible.

Minor Bleeding

Since small wounds with relatively little blood loss are not life threatening, you can take time to clean the wound with soap and water or water alone, and remove surface matter if you can do it without making the injury worse. Stop the bleeding with a compress or cloth to stop bleeding, then when the bleeding has stopped, bandage over the compress to keep it in place.

Other Notes on Bleeding

If injury is caused by an object sticking into the flesh, such as a large wood splinter, do not pull it out. This might cause an even more serious injury. Get the victim to medical help.

Any wounds caused by animals, whether wild or tame, require prompt medical attention. There is danger from infection, as well as the possibility of rabies. Be sure to wash the wound thoroughly.

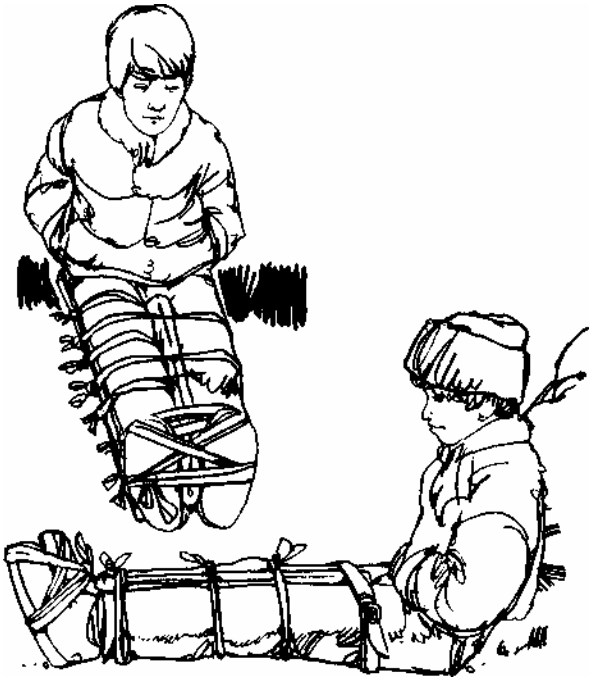
Puncture wounds could cause tetanus. Even a minor injury, like a nail through a shoe and into the sole of the foot, must be treated. Get the wound to bleed lightly, then wash clean. Cover with a bandage and get medical help as soon as possible.

Choking

Accidentally getting a piece of food stuck in the throat can be a terrible experience, as most everyone knows. It can be fatal. If a person is choking, but able to talk, or coughing, tell the person to try to cough it up himself. Keep encouraging the person. He will be all right. If, however, he is unable to speak, you must help. Bend victim over, head between the knees, and give him four vigorous blows between the shoulders with the heel of your hand. If this doesn't work, stand him erect and get around behind him. Reach around and place your clenched fist midway between the navel and rib cage. Place the other hand on top of the fist and thrust inward and upward against the abdomen four times. If unsuccessful, repeat over and over.

If the person becomes unconscious, turn him on his side, facing you. Give four sharp blows with the heel of your hand between the shoulder blades, over the spine. If the airway is still blocked, lay the person on his back. Face the person, kneeling beside or astride his hips. With one of your hands on top of the other, place the heel of the bottom hand on the abdomen slightly above the person's navel and below the rib cage. Press into the abdomen with four quick thrusts. Open the mouth with your thumb on the lower teeth and check for obstruction. Sweep the index finger inside the person's mouth to remove the foreign object. Take care not to force something further down the airway.

As the person is deprived of oxygen his muscles often relax. Continuing the back blows and manual abdominal thrusts may dislodge the object. Once the airway is reopened, check for breathing. If the person is not breathing, begin mouth-to-mouth breathing, and continue until the person revives, someone else relieves you, a physician pronounces the person dead, or you are absolutely too exhausted to continue.



BROKEN LEG: Place padding, coat, or blanket between legs; use belts or strips of cloth to bind legs firmly together. Make the patient as comfortable and free of pain as possible; treat for shock. Splint only if the patient must be moved. If unsure whether injury is a fracture or a sprain, treat as a fracture.

BROKEN ARM: Tie broken arm firmly to body using belts or strips of cloth. Make the patient as comfortable and free of pain as possible; treat for shock.

Shock

After any injury, shock can occur. This reaction to injury, pain, fear, or exhaustion can cause death depending upon the person and the circumstances.

A person in shock will be pale or even bluish, and the skin can be moist, cold, and clammy. Breathing may be rapid, becoming shallow and irregular. The pulse may also increase to more than 100 beats per minute. The victim may become weak. The eyes may be dull and unfocused. But do not wait for these symptoms to occur. After any injury, assume that shock will occur, and begin treatment immediately after treating life-threatening injuries.

Get the victim into the best shelter that is available. If the person cannot be moved, you will have to improvise a shelter using tarps, space blankets, or whatever you have at hand.

Make the person lie down. He may not want to do so, but you must take charge and firmly insist. Try to insulate the body from the ground with a sleeping bag, blankets, branches, grass, leaves, anything you can find. Provide the best comfort you can.

Raise the feet so that they are 8-10 inches higher than the head unless there are injuries that prevent it. If there are breathing problems, if the victim has chest or head injuries, do not raise the feet, but instead raise the head and shoulders slightly.

The injured person must be kept warm, but not covered so much as to become overheated.

In addition to physical care, a great need of a person in shock is reassurance. Speak soothingly, and as you do, try your best to appear calm and relaxed, even if the conditions are bad.

Now, treat any other injuries and relieve the pain where possible.

Hypothermia

Loss of core body heat resulting from exposure to cold temperatures, wind, water, or a combination of them, can cause hypothermia. Although proper selection of clothing, emergency shelters, and attention to the weather can minimize the chances of getting hypothermia, it can still happen.

Hypothermia symptoms include slurred speech, increasing clumsiness, and uncontrollable shivering. Often the person suffering from hypothermia won't know that he has it. For this reason, all in the party should keep close watch on each other when in cold, windy, and/or wet conditions. If you know a person is very cold, someone just taken from the water, for example, don't wait for symptoms but start rewarming immediately. In any case, here are the steps you should take if you suspect hypothermia:

Strip off wet clothing, dry the victim, and redress with dry clothing. If the victim can manage warm drinks, give him plenty of cocoa or soup.

Put the person in a sleeping bag, or wrap in blankets or coats, whatever you have.

Get the person out of the weather as soon as possible, into some kind of shelter. Your purpose now is to increase the body temperature of the victim until it returns to normal.

An effective way to rewarm a very cold person in a field situation is to remove your clothes and get into the sleeping bag with the victim. Chest-to-chest contact is the best.

How will you know when the person no longer has hypothermia? When he tells you so. When the shivering stops and the person looks, speaks, and acts normally, and his body temperature has returned to about 98.6° F.

Frostbite

In extremely cold weather, hands and feet and exposed parts of the face may become frostbitten. Fluids and soft tissue under the skin freeze. Proper cold-weather clothing will prevent frostbite except under extreme conditions.

Frostbitten skin will become yellow-gray or white. At the first signs, the skin must be rewarmed.

It is necessary to get out of the elements and into shelter to treat frostbite. If a hand is affected, it can often be rewarmed by holding it under an armpit or against the stomach. If warm water is available, it works well. The temperature should be warm, not over 105° F. When the skin thaws, it will appear flushed.

On the trail it is difficult to treat frostbite, especially of the feet. Do not take off your shoes and try to massage your feet. Rubbing frozen flesh can make things worse. Wiggling your toes inside your shoes or jumping in place can stimulate circulation to help warm your feet.

Heat Stress (Hyperthermia)

When conditions of extreme heat cause the body temperature to rise above 98.6° F, serious problems can occur:

Heat Stroke (Sunstroke)

This most often occurs after prolonged exertion in hot weather. Sweating, the body's way of keeping a normal temperature, slowly decreases and can eventually stop. When this happens, the body tem¬perature can rise above 105° F and a heat stroke may happen soon. Heatstroke can be prevented by restricting activities when the day is hot, as well as by wearing proper clothing including headgear.

When sweating stops, the face will become flushed and reddish in color. Action must be taken quickly. The person must be moved out of the sun and into the shade immediately. Apply water, the cooler the better. You must get the body temperature down as soon as possible. Even then, the person should get medical help as soon as possible.

Dehydration

Caused by lack of water in the body, this can happen fast in hot weather. The first sign will usually be dark yellow urine. You should drink when thirsty. Restricting your intake of water can reduce your feeling of thirst. People have been found dead in the desert with water still in their canteens. Rationing water does not help get you through.

In hot conditions you should move slowly, so that exertion will not cause any more sweating than necessary. Keeping moisture in the body is the best way to avoid hot-weather problems.

Heat Exhaustion

Too much exertion in hot weather, even if the person has plenty of water, can cause weakness, nausea, and moist, clammy skin. The person's speech may not make sense. If you notice these symptoms beginning to occur, get the person to lie on his back, in the shade. The head should be level with or lower than the feet.

The patient may feel chilly, and should be covered. Give a solution of a teaspoon of salt to a quart of water. If he is suffering only from mild heat exhaustion, the patient will recover quickly in response to your first aid. If he does not respond rapidly, then you must get medical help as soon as you can.

Sunburn

Sunburn is classified as a first-degree burn, with the skin appearing reddish and inflamed. While rarely life threatening, the pain and discomfort can ruin an outing. In the spring, first exposure to the sun should not be longer than 15 minutes. Sun blockers in cream or ointment form can help. Experienced outdoorsmen seldom get sunburn. They wear clothing that covers arms and legs. Wide-brimmed hats protect the face and neck.

If you do get a sunburn, a burn lotion may help by keeping out air. Other than keeping the sunburned area covered, there is not much more you can do in the field.

Second-Degree Burn

This is a deeper burn with blisters. The burned area should be held in cold water or covered with snow as soon as possible. After around 30 minutes, the pain will usually be much less. Do not apply lotion. Instead, gently blot the area dry and cover with several layers of dressing.

Third-Degree Burn

This burn goes deeper than the surface and damages underlying tissue. There is actual charring of the skin and flesh. A person with such a severe burn needs medical help as soon as possible. About the best you can do is to cover the burn loosely with clean, dry bandaging material and then wrap with plastic to keep out the dirt. Do not use lotions or immerse the burn in cold water. You could cause more injury. A third-degree burn victim will probably go into shock if the burns are at all extensive.

Blisters

Blisters, like sunburn, won't kill you, but they certainly can make life miserable. If you are in a situation where you must continue hiking, the pain can be extreme. To prevent blisters from forming, stop at the first opportunity and examine the foot. Where you can see a pink area caused by the rubbing qf the shoe, take a piece of moleskin from your first aid kit and cut it slightly larger than the hot spot. Cut out the center of the moleskin so that it is like a small doughnut. Tape it in place and with luck no blister will appear. If it does, and you must open it, disinfect a needle in flame, and pierce the wound near an edge. Press out the fluid gently. You now have a small wound that must be bandaged. Ideally, you won't have to hike much farther. A raw blister can become terribly sore and infected.

Snakebite

Not all snakes are poisonous, and not all poisonous snakes have venom. If you are bitten, assume the snake is poisonous. Stop moving. Excess activity will spread the poison faster. Lie down if you can. Keep the bitten area lower than the heart. Immobilize the limb. For example, if a leg is bitten, tie or strap it to the other leg. Use pieces of cloth, belts, whatever you have. If victim can be taken to a hospital within 5 hours, do no more.

If pain, nausea, and shortness of breath begin to occur, along with swelling and discoloration of the bite area, put a constricting band on the heart side of the wound. A belt works well, as long as it is from 3A to l'/2 inches wide. Keep the band snug. If you can just slip a finger under it, it is tight enough. If swelling increases, be sure to loosen band, but do not remove it. Check for pulse on both sides of the band. You must not cut off circulation of blood entirely.

If you are the victim, try to keep calm. If someone else is the victim, reassure them. Snakebite is seldom fatal in North America.

Keep the patient warm and under shelter. If there are more than two in the party, send for help after first aid is applied. If alone, you may have to suffer it out. Trying to hike with your system full of venom could be deadly. Chances are good you will survive if you stay where you are and wait for help.

Insect Stings and Bites

No matter how much bug lotion you may apply, stings and bites from insects will happen. If you know you are going into a bad insect area, you can take along netting to cover your face and gloves for your hands. Needless to say, wear a long-sleeve shirt and pants. Five percent hydrocortisone cream will soothe the stings and bites of insects and will relieve the itch of poison oak and poison ivy as well. If you don't have any medications, try an old-fashioned remedy that really works—mud. Just dab some mud on the spot, and shortly the pain of the sting will start to fade.

Some people are allergic to bee stings, and to them a sting can become a deadly serious emergency. They must try to avoid bees and always carry medicines prescribed as antidotes when they are outdoors. People with these allergies should advise their companions and show them how to administer the medication.

Bees, and especially yellow jackets, can be a real nuisance in camp. Usually they will leave you alone if you ignore them. They are attracted by food, so make sure you burn scraps or seal them in a plastic bag to carry out later. If you are not in bear country, you could bury scraps-more about that later.

Ticks

While ordinary insects are more of an annoyance than anything else, ticks can cause illness. After hiking in country known to have ticks, examine yourself carefully all over. A tick can crawl inside your clothing quite a distance before digging in. And, as he buries his head in your flesh, he injects an anesthetic so that you feel no pain. A day or so later, you may find a tick embedded under your anklebone or some other hard-to-see place.

It is possible to remove a tick by gently pulling, but all too often you will have the tick's body between your fingers and the head will still be in you. This can cause a bad sore and leave a permanent scar. Instead of pulling, try applying vegetable oil or petroleum oil over the area. Margarine also will work, and even thick, soapy water can be used. This cuts off the tick's oxygen supply, and may cause it to back off. If the tick is still in place after 20-30 minutes, remove it carefully with tweezers.

After the tick is removed, wash the wound area carefully with soap and water and apply an antiseptic solution.

If tick fever is prevalent where you hike, you must get medical attention soon if you are bitten. Always avoid touching a tick, as tick fever can be transmitted by finger contact.

Prescription Medications

If you have prescription medicine that you must take regularly, have a supply with you even on short trips. For example, you may require medication once a day, and you intend to be out for only a few hours. You expect to be home before dark, so you don't bother to take your medicine with you. What if something unforeseen keeps you away for a day? Several days? Always plan for the unexpected.

Hygiene

Personal cleanliness is not crucial in a short-term survival emergency. However, health problems such as intestinal sickness and infections can be prevented by taking normal precautions.

Intestinal sickness can be prevented by keeping the hands and body clean, by purifying drinking water, by sterilizing eating utensils, by avoiding excessive handling of food, and by keeping the fingers away from the mouth.

Infections are best prevented by immediately treating cuts, sores, and wounds and keeping them as clean as possible.

Dirty clothing can cause discomfort and irritate the body. Conditions permitting, clothing can be aired to remove moisture. If water is available, washing clothes will remove most of the dirt and perspiration.

Hygiene for personal comfort should only be considered after all other survival priorities have been met.