

From beach to backyard, caution can reduce firepit burns

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Backyard barbecues and beach bonfires are beloved summer activities across the country, but they also put people – especially children – at risk of painful, long-term injury.

Dr. Marianne Cinat, UC Irvine Regional Burn Center director, urges extra caution with the use and cleanup of firepits or barbecues at the beach and at campsites. "We're seeing approximately two dozen firepit injuries each year," said Cinat, a surgery professor at UC Irvine Medical Center. "And all of these accidents are preventable."

Cinat has noticed more burns as camping and backyard firepits have become more popular. About half of the injuries treated at her center occur at the beach; most involve children 6 and younger who crawl or fall into firepits.

And then there are the hidden dangers of sand-covered coals. Tina Aldatz Norris learned firsthand about those.

As a young girl growing up in Orange County, Aldatz Norris burned the soles of her feet on hot charcoals buried beneath sand at a beach firepit. She was treated at the UCI Regional Burn Center for severe burns on both feet. For months afterward, the simple act of walking in sneakers or flats was painful.

To this day, Aldatz Norris's feet are sensitive and prone to blistering. So she started Foot Petals, a Long Beach-based company that brings

together podiatrists and engineers to create designer insoles that help women walk more comfortably.

"I've been inspired to turn a bad situation into a positive event in my life," says Aldatz Norris, a Certified Pedorthist qualified to design orthotics. "I know that many children are injured every year due to firepit injuries, and I feel it's critically important to raise safety awareness."

Cinat says that there are some simple and crucial steps adults can take to lessen the risk of firepit burn injuries.

-- Don't bury hot charcoals in sand. While sand might extinguish the flames, coals can smolder for up to 24 hours. Sand locks in heat, making smoldering coals even hotter. Worse yet, sand-covered coals cannot be seen, making them even more dangerous to children who may look at a firepit as a sand box. Cinat recommends that coals be extinguished by drenching them in water, waiting five minutes and drenching them again. If water is not available, simply let the coals burn out. The most risk occurs when hot coals are buried in the sand, creating a hidden danger.

-- Be aware of your environment, especially with children around. Treat firepits as you would a pool or anything else dangerous and exercise similar caution around them. Be wary of embers that spark from firepits. Even if it appears as if it has not been used recently, always assume there are hot coals or embers at the bottom of a firepit.

-- If injured, don't put ice on the skin. Ice can cause skin damage, especially to children, whose skin is thinner than adults. Wash the burn with cool water for up to 10 minutes. For a small area, put a cool washcloth on it; with a larger burn, a cool towel can lower body temperature. Take the burn victim immediately to the nearest emergency room.

Source: University of California - Irvine

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