

Parents warn of fire pit danger

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Delaney Deems, 2, suffered second- and third-degree burns to her feet when she stepped into a sand-covered fire pit at Dana Point's Doheny State Beach. The bandages and splint on her left arm immobilize her wrist and secure IV tubes.
Daniel A. Anderson, University Communications

(PhysOrg.com) -- Chris and Lindsey Deems know firsthand how dangerous beach fire pits can be to children. Their daughter Delaney, 2, suffered second- and third-degree burns to her feet when she stepped into a sand-covered fire pit July 18 at Doheny State Beach in Dana Point.

With several more months of summer weather left, the Ladera Ranch couple wants to warn other parents. "These pits are not harmless, even if it doesn't look like anything is burning," says Lindsey Deems.

Fire pits can smolder for up to 24 hours despite being covered with sand, which may lock in the heat even if the flames are out, says Dr. Marianne

Cinat, director of UC Irvine's Regional [Burn](#) Center in Orange. Injuries occur with distressing regularity.

UC Irvine Medical Center, which has Orange County's only American College of Surgeons-verified burn center, typically treats two dozen people hurt by fire pits and barbecues each summer. This year the hospital has already treated 23 such patients, including 17 [children](#), and the beach season is far from over.

"These accidents are preventable," Cinat says. She advises adults to exercise caution when using or cleaning up fire pits. The one Delaney stepped into probably had been used Friday night but was covered with sand and appeared cold by Saturday afternoon, her parents say.

"When you're at the beach, parents are concerned about kids in the waves," says Chris Deems. "Who thinks a fire pit is still burning a day later?"

And an injury only takes a moment. Chris had been brushing sand off his daughter and changing her clothes next to an unused fire pit because Doheny's bathrooms and beach showers had no running water that day, he says. He turned to shake sand out of her swimsuit when Delaney started screaming.

"I turned away for a few seconds, and she had jumped into the pit," he says.

After several hours in a south Orange County [emergency room](#), Delaney was transferred to UC Irvine Regional Burn Center. Treatment involved scouring away damaged skin to expose unburned layers; hydrotherapy sessions and specially formulated topical solutions are used to stimulate regrowth. Delaney was discharged Aug. 7 and faces weeks of checkups and rehabilitation.

"In patients Delaney's age, we like to see whether the skin can heal itself," Cinat says. Skin grafts could pose problems for younger children, who may need additional surgery to replace grafts as they grow.

"Our daughter was in excruciating pain for days, and as parents we felt entirely helpless," Chris Deems says. "We're just grateful her injuries weren't worse. She could have fallen and burned much more than the bottom of her feet."

"We want to raise awareness of the danger of covering a beach fire pit with sand so other parents and children can avoid what our family has been through," he says.

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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