

Help for Families of North Carolina Burn Victims



There is nothing worse than the pain of a burn injury. Your loved one is going through horrible pain and suffering. As burn injury lawyers, we have seen how tough the situation is for the victims' families. We have seen family members who are exhausted, concerned, angry and who sometimes don't get the answers they need. The injury is life-changing not only to the patient, but also to the family. This booklet is for the families of people who have suffered severe burn injuries. We've put together information that our clients' families needed, and we hope it helps you too.

What To Expect When Someone Suffers A Burn Injury



A Long Stay in a Hospital or Burn Center. Serious burns can take weeks, months, even years to heal. The good news is that patients usually can receive all of their treatment in one place, either a burn center or the burn unit of a hospital. In this state, we're fortunate to have two major burn centers—North Carolina Jaycee Burn Center in Chapel Hill and Wake Forest Baptist Burn Center in Winston-Salem.

Pain. Patients say the only thing more painful than a burn is the treatment for it. Dressings have to be changed often. What's worse, the wounds often need to be scraped. It's a process called debriding (pronounced "dee-BREED-ing"). It's where the nurses remove dead tissue, blisters, and debris, then clean and disinfect the wound, often in a tub or shower. Sometimes it's done every day. The pain is excruciating, however, it's the best treatment that exists today to keep the risk of infection down.

After patients go home, pain can make it hard for them to sleep, work, exercise or enjoy the activities they did before. Severe pain is not good for healing. Make sure the doctor is aware of how pain is affecting your loved one. Pain medication alone may not be enough, but there are other options—like relaxation therapy, acupuncture, prayer and even hypnosis—that may help.

Scarring and Discoloration. Scarring is normal after a burn—burned skin forms scar tissue as it heals. The amount of scarring that will be permanent is hard to predict. Some scars go away in a few months. Deep burns can keep building up scar tissue for years. If the scars are disfiguring, sometimes they can be improved with treatments like laser surgery.

Burned skin may change color, turning pink, brown or gray. This, too, is a normal part of healing. Like scarring, it should improve with time, though some may be permanent.

Rehabilitation. As a burn heals, the skin contracts. This causes muscles and joints to tighten. Patients need to keep moving so that they don't become rigid. For example, a burned arm can become unusable if the skin and muscles tighten too much. Rehabilitation—physical and occupational therapy—usually starts in the hospital and continues at home. The hospital therapist should set up a program of exercises and give you instructions on how to help. The therapist can also help you find exercise equipment for your home.



Surgeries. Burn patients often need multiple surgeries. J.R. Martinez of “Dancing with the Stars” was severely burned in a landmine explosion while serving as an Army infantryman in Iraq in 2003. Since then, he’s had 34 different surgeries—skin grafts, tissue expansions, and plastic surgeries. Most were

performed **after** his three-year recovery in the hospital. Many of our clients have had multiple surgeries for what have seemed like relatively small burn injuries.

Psychological Trauma. Suffering a burn injury will likely be the most severe trauma a person will ever experience. It can cause nightmares, post-traumatic stress disorder, severe depression and anxiety. Burn patients can be extremely self-conscious about their appearance, and this can lead to loneliness. You may notice your loved one withdrawing; you may need to keep visitors from tiring them out. Make sure the doctor knows what’s going on. Your loved one may need therapy or medication or both to help with the psychological fallout.

Disability. Deep burns are serious injuries, and burn victims often can’t go back to work, or to the work they were doing before—especially if the injury happened on the job. It may be too traumatizing.

Did your family rely on your loved one for financial support? This would be a good time to sit down with someone you trust—a financial advisor, attorney, close friend or family member—to review your available resources and start planning for the future.

If your loved one has been managing household finances, you should find out how the bills are paid and get any necessary passwords. Individual bank accounts may need to be converted to joint accounts. If you don’t already have a power of attorney for your loved one, you should have one drawn up.

Tips for Helping At Home



Help with Bathing. New skin is delicate and sensitive to extreme temperatures. If you're helping your loved one bathe, first check the temperature of the water to be sure it's not too hot or cold. Be gentle, especially with open wounds. It's not a good idea for burn patients to soak in the tub.

Clothing and Protection for New Skin. New skin bruises and blisters easily. Patients should avoid rough fabrics, tight clothes and tight shoes. They should stay out of the sun as much as possible, and wear sunscreen, light clothing, and a hat when going outside. ***This advice may apply to them for the rest of their lives.*** The same applies to cold; avoid going outside, and wear warm clothing. Some patients complain of tingling and numbness in their hands and feet. This should gradually go away as the skin toughens.

Lotion for Dry, Itchy Skin. Burned skin can't produce oil the way it did before. You can help by applying lotion or mineral oil. There are many lotions on the market, but ***avoid any lotions that contain lanolin or alcohol***, because they can cause blisters. When in doubt, ask the doctor to recommend or prescribe a lotion. And (easier said than done) try not to let the patient scratch!

Exercise. The physical therapist will assign home exercises. These are important to prevent muscles from tightening up, and should be done regularly. Patients should be encouraged to move around as much as possible instead of standing in one place. Moderate exercise can help with circulation, pain and swelling. ***This will also help the patient emotionally.*** If your loved one continues to have a lot of pain or swelling, tell the doctor.

Diet. Good nutrition and weight management are important for healing. A home diet should contain plenty of ***protein***—beans, nuts, cheese, fish, eggs, meat, poultry and milk—as well as ***vitamins and minerals*** from dairy products, whole grain cereals, enriched breads, fruits and vegetables. Include one good source of ***Vitamin C*** each day, such as citrus fruits, tomatoes, green vegetables, and potatoes. It's best to have a variety of foods since different foods have different nutrients. Saturated fat should be limited.

Compression Stockings and Wraps. Patients may need to wear elastic stockings, socks, pantyhose, sleeves, or even entire suits to help with circulation, strengthen veins, and reduce pain and swelling.



Time for Yourself. Taking care of someone you love who's been badly hurt is demanding in every way. You need support, too; a worn-out caregiver can't give the most effective care. ***So, make a point of attending to your basic daily needs—sleep, nutrition, exercise.*** Beyond that, what restores you? Listening to music? Riding your bicycle? Going for walks, gardening, spending time outdoors? Whatever it is, build time for it into your schedule, even if it's only an hour a week. And, carve out a few minutes each day for quiet time. It's important that you have a chance to recharge. We have seen family members who did too much, only to collapse after a while and then be unable to help their injured family member in the long run, because they were burned out and resentful.

Let Friends Help. Maybe you have friends or family who want to help but you're hesitating to lean on them, maybe you're protecting your loved one's privacy, or maybe you're just too overwhelmed right now to know how to use help. This is a time to delegate. Ask one or two friends to be your "point people" for organizing meals, rides to appointments, errands, whatever you need. They can do this easily through one of the inexpensive "sign-up" websites, like Caring Bridge, that coordinate volunteers and even send reminders. Designate one friend to share health updates with the others and let them know whether and when it's okay to visit.



Support For You *(continued)*



Counseling and Support Groups. Even if you don't have a built-in support network, ***you are not alone***. There are people who can help you. There's always therapy if you can afford it. You can also get help through **SOAR** (Survivors Offering Assistance in Recovery), a program offered by the North Carolina Jaycee Burn Center that provides free one-on-one peer counseling from trained volunteers, often burn survivors themselves. ***Peer counseling can be done***

in person, over the phone, or by email. Visit www.med.unc.edu/burn/burn-programs/aftercare-programs-temp/peer-support or contact Chaplain Shirley Massey at (984) 974-0218 or shirley.massey@unchealth.unc.edu.

There are also free support groups where you can share stories, ideas and resources with people who are going through the same thing you are. Several support groups meet in or near North Carolina:

- **Victim 2 Victor.** Organized through the Wake Forest Baptist Burn Center, this group meets the third Saturday of each month in Winston-Salem and hosts several local events. Visit www.burnsupportnc.net or www.wfubmc.edu/burncenter.
- **Triangle Burn Support Group**, another Chapel Hill-based group, meets occasionally for social and charitable events. Visit www.burnsurvivor.org.
- **Burn Survivor Support Group** meets every first Saturday in Asheville. Contact CarePartners Health Services at (828) 277-4800.
- **Tidewater Burn Survivors Group** meets every second Thursday in Norfolk, VA. Visit www.sentara.com/classesevents/support-groups/tidewater-burn-survivors.aspx.

Online Support. The Phoenix Society, the leading national nonprofit organization for burn survivors and families, offers a free weekly chat led by

a trained volunteer. The website also provides a discussion board. Visit www.phoenix-society.org and click on “get support.”



Conferences, Camps and Events. There are many events where survivors and families can meet, get information, share stories and resources, and have fun. Here are a few:

World Burn Congress: Every October, The Phoenix Society hosts an international conference that brings together more than 900 burn survivors, families, caregivers, burn care professionals, and firefighters. The event is

held in a different city each year. It offers workshops, speakers, and lots of opportunities for networking. For information and conference registration, visit www.phoenix-society.org/wbc. Some scholarships are available from The Phoenix Society; also check with local firefighters' organizations about possible financial aid. A client of our firm goes every year with her family and would not miss it for anything.

North Carolina Jaycee Burn Center hosts these events:

- Adult Burn Survivor Retreat, an annual retreat for burn survivors, family members, and caregivers
- Camp Celebrate, a weekend camp for burn survivors ages 7-15
- Teen Adventure Weekend, a weekend camp for burn survivors ages 13-18
- Family Camp, a weekend camp for the families of burn survivors ages 7-18
- Regional Burn Support Fun Days
- Burn Survivors Reunion, an annual gathering for the whole family that includes both formal programs and informal times for networking and sharing

You can also visit www.med.unc.edu/burn/burn-programs/aftercare-programs-temp/events for the North Carolina Jaycee Burn Center event calendar.

Compensation And Insurance

Medical bills from a burn injury can be staggering, and most patients will need ongoing care, equipment, and support. Many will be disabled, at least temporarily. If your family has been impacted by a burn, there are several possible sources of financial help. **One thing you should *not* do is use a credit card to pay hospital bills.** Most hospitals will work out payment arrangements for amounts not covered by insurance. Credit card companies are unforgiving; they don't care about your situation.

Health Insurance. Most hospitals have discharge planners or counselors who can help with long-range planning for medical coverage. If you believe your insurance company is unfairly denying coverage, call an attorney.

Disability Insurance. If your loved one has disability insurance either privately, through an employer or as part of a life insurance policy, this can be a source of compensation. Sometimes this insurance will help pay a mortgage directly.

Social Security Disability. A burn survivor who can't work can file a Social Security disability claim. If the doctors are saying now that the injury will keep your family member out of the workforce for at least a year, you should apply for these benefits right away.

Workers' Compensation. If the injury happened on the job, a workers' compensation claim can be filed. Our law firm specializes in handling workers'

compensation claims and can help with the claim if something doesn't go smoothly. Even if the claim seems to be going fine and you just have questions, we can answer them. Sometimes in workers' compensation cases, family members can be compensated for the time spent caring for their loved one with a burn injury, or for traveling to be with them in the hospital. The workers' compensation insurance carrier may or may not pay this compensation willingly. If they do not, you should contact a lawyer for help.

Personal Injury Claim. Even if a fire or explosion may seem like an accident, often these injuries are caused because someone failed to follow safety laws or regulations. For example, a building owner may have ignored a hidden hazardous situation, even though innocent people were exposed to it on a daily basis. Perhaps a boiler should have been inspected regularly but wasn't. Depending on the circumstances, an award or settlement could be large enough to pay medical expenses and provide financial security for your family. If you are a spouse of a burn victim, you may have a claim for your own lost time and emotional injuries from caring for your loved one.

A fire or explosion may have more than one cause, and figuring out who should pay can be complicated. This may require the hiring of expert engineers who can get to the bottom of what went wrong.

You have your choice of lawyers, so you want to make sure you hire a firm that is experienced with burns and explosions, and understands the injuries and

their effects on survivors and families. These cases are normally handled on a contingent basis.

Auto Insurance. If the burn happened in a wreck caused by someone else, that driver's auto insurance should pay. If the driver's insurance isn't enough to cover all of the losses, the UM/UIM (uninsured/underinsured motorist) coverage in the patient's own auto policy should pay the difference, up to the patient's policy limits. Also, if that policy includes medical payments ("medpay") coverage, it should reimburse all medical bills up to the limits of coverage, whether or not those bills are covered by health insurance—and it may pay for things health insurance doesn't cover, like modifications to your home.

Firefighters' Associations and Charitable Organizations.

There are many organizations offering assistance to burn survivors and their families. Here are a few:

- NC Firefighters Burned Children's Fund: (888) 284-7954
- The Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors, Inc.: (800) 888-2876
- Shriners Hospitals for Children: (800) 237-5055

Crowdfunding. For medical expenses that can't get paid any other way, there's crowdfunding—creating a web page that allows others to make donations to a private account set up for your family. There are several inexpensive, user-friendly websites such as GiveForward, GoFundMe, Healthline,

and FundRazr that allow you to set up a web page, share it on social media, and keep track of donations. If you're uncomfortable doing this yourself, ask for help from a tech-savvy friend or a librarian.



Resources

WEBSITES **North Carolina Jaycee Burn Center**

www.med.unc.edu/burn

The Phoenix Society

www.phoenix-society.or

DOCUMENTARY **"Burn Survivors Tell Their Stories"**

youtu.be/1B5ucNKIIGQ

ARTICLE **"After the Fire," by Maria Blackburn, Johns Hopkins Magazine**

pages.jh.edu/jhumag/0907web/burn.html.

The story of a burn injury and recovery as seen from the hospital's point of view.

PODCAST **Guided Meditations by Tara Brach**

www.tarabrach.com/guided-meditations. Soothing meditations to help relieve stress.

BOOKS **Out of the Fire by Deborah Froese.**

A young adult romance novel about a teenager coming to terms with a disfiguring burn injury.

Full of Heart: My Story of Survival, Strength, and Spirit by J.R. Martinez.

Memoir by the burn survivor who went on to become a "Dancing with the Stars" winner and motivational speaker.

This brochure is not intended as legal advice in your particular case. If you have questions about a potential legal claim for a family member who was burned or in an explosion, we will be glad to speak with you. Calling and getting answers to your questions is completely free.

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Copeley Johnson & Groninger PLLC is a law firm with offices in Durham and Charlotte, NC focused on representing individuals and their family members who find themselves in circumstances that they never expected. Our clients include those who have been injured on the job, on the road, and on the premises of businesses and public facilities. We also help those whose employers have violated their legal rights. Often we help persons who find themselves in delicate situations and need assistance in managing outcomes.

Our attorneys regularly speak to groups of lawyers and non-lawyers about these issues. Please contact us at your convenience if you need information about any of our areas of practice, or would like to schedule a consultation.



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