

# Self-Harm

## Definition

- Self-harm is when a child or teen hurts her body on purpose.
- Self-harm behaviors are cutting, scraping, biting or burning the skin.
- The medical term for self-harm is "self-injurious behavior" (SIB).

## Health Information

### Causes

- Self-harm is a way to deal with negative feelings. The physical pain distracts from shame, guilt, sadness, anger or anxiety. It temporarily relieves stress.
- Self-harm can be a way to express painful feelings a child has trouble talking about.
- Children with mental health problems are more likely to self-harm. Examples are depression, anxiety, and eating disorders.
- Most children who self-harm are not suicidal. Self-harm is not meant to be a suicide attempt.

### Symptoms

- Cuts, scrapes, bruises or burns are often on the arms and inner thighs.
- Self-harm is usually superficial, only injuring the skin.
- Repeated picking keeps wounds from healing.
- Self-harm is often done in secret.
- Children who self-harm may hide their skin with long sleeves or pants.

## Care Advice

### 1. Key Points

- Self-harm is hurting the body on purpose, such as cutting or burning the skin.
- Self-harm is a way to relieve emotional pain or stress.
- It occurs in up to 20% of teens.
- Therapy can help find better ways to cope.

### 2. Help Your Child Talk

- Help your child identify and talk about the events that trigger self-harm. Triggers may be obvious (such as loss of a friendship) or more subtle (such as social media rumors).
- Encourage her to talk about her feelings. This releases some of the pain they are causing. It also can reduce the urge to self-harm.
- Listen to your child without judgment.
- If you can't do this, help her find someone who can.

### 3. Support Your Child

- Tell your child how much you love her. Hugs speak louder than words.
- Tell her she is not alone. You will try to help her find ways to deal with her strong feelings.
- You will help her find therapy.
- When your child has an urge to self-harm, help distract her. Take a walk together. Watch a favorite movie together.
- Encourage her to write about her feelings in a journal.

#### 4. **Therapy Helps**

- Therapy will help your child learn to cope with negative feelings.
- Therapy will teach your child new thoughts and behaviors to better manage her emotions and stress.
- Without therapy, children who self-harm once are very likely to do it again.
- Your doctor can help find a therapist who treats children who self-harm.
- Most self-harm can be managed without needing to go to the ER.

#### 5. **Reach Out for Help**

- Get help finding a therapist through [www.findtreatment.gov](http://www.findtreatment.gov).
- Call 1-800-662 HELP for confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day help dealing with mental health issues. Help is in English and Spanish.
- Call 988 for the National Crisis and Suicide Hotline for concerns about suicide.

#### 6. **Care for Wounds**

- Wash scrapes, cuts or burns with soap and water.
- For any bleeding, put direct pressure on the wound. Use a gauze pad or clean cloth. Press for 10 minutes or until the bleeding has stopped.
- For minor infections, apply an antibiotic ointment such as Polysporin. No prescription is needed.
- Call your doctor for any cut that is split open. Reason: it may need sutures.

#### 7. **Remove Harmful Objects**

- Limit your child's access to things they can use to self-harm.
- Examples are knives, razors, box cutters, needles, lighters, and matches.

### **Call Your Doctor If**

- Wound may need sutures
- Wound starts to look infected (pus, spreading redness)
- Your child expresses thoughts of suicide
- You think your child needs to be seen
- Your child becomes worse

#### **Pediatric Care Advice**

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