

5 Life-Threatening Injuries That Are Totally Survivable During a Disaster—if You Know How

by James Hubbard, MD, MPH

I get a gnawing feeling in my stomach when I hear stories of people who died from an injury they might have survived if they'd just known a little more basic medicine. Or maybe they knew but just weren't thinking right at the time.

And then there are the people who saved lives with well-applied tourniquets and other techniques, makeshift or otherwise, that often aren't even taught in typical first-aid classes. If you'd like to know more about such techniques, I do have a [video course](#).

Getting a devastating injury doesn't always equal a death sentence, even if you're in a disaster or homesteading or otherwise unable to get immediate professional help. If you know the right things to do, you may be able to survive—or save the life of a loved one.

Here are my best tips to deal with five life-threatening injuries when you can't get to a doctor, until you can. (In addition to all these tips, **have someone quickly call 911** if possible.) My suggestion is to put these to memory.

1. Deep Wound to an Extremity

Most common immediate threat to life: Blood loss.

My tips: Many people don't know how to stop bleeding. If there's one thing you learn from this post, learn this. Stopping bleeding has saved many a life.

Before dealing with a wound, protect yourself and the victim from blood-borne illness by putting on [medical gloves](#). If you have none, improvise with plastic bags, a towel—the best thing you can find. It may not work as well, but it's better than nothing.

One of these things will hopefully stop the bleeding:

1. **Direct pressure**—pressing on the injury with your hand. This usually works. (Pressing above or

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- below the injury may also help if you can tell whether the bleeding is [from an artery or vein.](#))
2. If this stops the bleeding but it starts again when you release pressure, make a **pressure dressing**.
 3. If neither of these things works, apply a **tourniquet**. Tighten it until the bleeding stops.

Some people also like to keep [QuikClot](#) or Celox on hand, a product that uses chemicals to stop bleeding. I prefer the bandage type over the granules because the granules are hard to clean out. Read the instructions before you need to use it and remember, the material must make contact with the bleeding blood vessel in order to work.

After bleeding, the next life-threatening worry is usually infection, so if you're going to be without help for a while, [clean the wound properly](#) and use antibacterial ointment or [honey](#).*

>> [Click here](#) for more details on assessing and treating a wound.

>> [Click here](#) to get all my best wound treatment tips, from simple to advanced, in *The Survival Doctor's Guide to Wounds*

2. Bad Burn

Most common immediate threat to life: Swelling.

My tips: Especially if a large burn involves the face or neck, you're in trouble. There can be so much swelling that you can't breathe. If you have to call in an airlift to get professional help, do it. Same thing goes if you have burns to a large part of the body. Meantime, do this:

- Immediately remove clothes and jewelry in the burned area. The items may still be hot, and jewelry can get stuck if there's swelling.
- Cool the burn with water-soaked material draped over the skin.
- To try to prevent swelling, keep applying cool cloths, and elevate the burned area to heart level or above.

After you've dealt with this immediate threat, next up are dehydration and infection. Third-degree burns will need help in the healing process too. My e-book *The Survival Doctor's Guide to Burns* gives in-depth tips. Get some of them for free [here](#).



Learning an advanced technique for treating a tension pneumothorax in [The Survival Doctor's Emergencies Training Course](#).

3. Collapsed Lung Caused by an External Puncture Wound

Most common immediate threat to life: Potential to become a tension pneumo.

My tips: Been knifed or shot in the chest? You may quickly get a collapsed lung. A puncture through to the chest wall can allow air into the chest cavity. The lung will shrink or collapse in response. This isn't necessarily immediately life threatening, but it has the potential to become something that is: a tension pneumothorax.

With a tension pneumo, more and more air keeps getting into the chest, and none escapes. The collapsed lung starts pressing on the heart, which may just stop.

So when someone gets a deep puncture wound to the chest, head off a tension pneumo by sealing the wound so air can't keep getting in. To seal it, you can simply use petroleum jelly and a bandage. A credit card or something similar over the wound works also. The fluids keep the card attached to the skin. The card seals the wound when the person breathes in, but it's loose enough for air to escape when the person breathes out.

- *Caveat 1: A simple collapsed lung does cause shortness of breath, but if the person has severe shortness of breath and is getting worse, they may already have a tension pneumothorax, in which case [more advanced treatment is needed](#).*
- *Caveat 2: A broken rib can also cause a collapsed lung, but in that case there's no way to seal the wound from the outside. If the puncture is small and you can't get help, it may heal on its own. [Here's information on treating broken ribs](#).*

>>**Click for more details: [collapsed lung](#) , [tension pneumo](#).**

4. Open Fracture

Most common immediate threat to life: Blood loss, then infection.

My tips: When a broken bone pokes out of a wound, even for a split second, you have an open fracture. The bone can easily and quickly get a life-threatening infection. So after you stop the bleeding, [irrigate](#), [irrigate](#), [irrigate](#) to clean that wound out as best you can. Apply antibacterial ointment or honey,* and cover the wound. Then irrigate it again once or twice a day until you can get help. Start antibiotics if available.

>> [Click here](#) for more details on treating open fractures.

5. Gunshot Wound

Most common immediate threat to life: Blood loss.

My tips: When someone is shot, that main wound you see may not be the only wound there is. Check all over, and stop the bleeding wherever you find it. A bullet can go in one part of the body, bounce around, and shoot out somewhere else. Surgery will probably be required in such a case for internal bleeding, but you can at least stop the bleeding that's visible.

Also cover the victim to prevent shock.

>> [Click here](#) for more details on treating gunshot wounds.

>> [Click here](#) to learn the right way to roll a person over who may have a back or neck injury.

You can go beyond typical first-aid classes and get more in-depth training for common emergencies in The Survival Doctor's Emergencies Training Course, where I personally teach you stuff I think you need to know. [Click here](#) learn more.



What about you? Have you ever had to deal with a life-threatening injury on your own? What did you do?

**Warning: Kids under 2 can get botulism from honey. Use antibacterial ointment instead if available.*



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