

Self-injury/cutting

Nonsuicidal self-injury, often simply called self-injury, is the act of deliberately harming your own body, such as cutting or burning yourself. It's typically not meant as a suicide attempt. Rather, this type of self-injury is a harmful way to cope with emotional pain, intense anger and frustration.

While self-injury may bring a momentary sense of calm and a release of tension, it's usually followed by guilt and shame and the return of painful emotions. Although life-threatening injuries are usually not intended, with self-injury comes the possibility of more-serious and even fatal self-aggressive actions.

Getting appropriate treatment can help you learn healthier ways to cope.

Symptoms

Signs and symptoms of self-injury may include:

- Scars, often in patterns
- Fresh cuts, scratches, bruises, bite marks or other wounds
- Excessive rubbing of an area to create a burn
- Keeping sharp objects on hand
- Wearing long sleeves or long pants, even in hot weather
- Frequent reports of accidental injury
- Difficulties in interpersonal relationships
- Behavioral and emotional instability, impulsivity and unpredictability
- Statements of helplessness, hopelessness or worthlessness

Forms of self-injury

Self-injury usually occurs in private and is done in a controlled or ritualistic manner that often leaves a pattern on the skin. Examples of self-harm include:

- Cutting (cuts or severe scratches with a sharp object)
- Scratching

- Burning (with lit matches, cigarettes or heated, sharp objects such as knives)
- Carving words or symbols on the skin
- Self-hitting, punching or head banging
- Piercing the skin with sharp objects
- Inserting objects under the skin

Most frequently, the arms, legs and front of the torso are the targets of self-injury, but any area of the body may be used for self-injury. People who self-injure may use more than one method to harm themselves.

Becoming upset can trigger an urge to self-injure. Many people self-injure only a few times and then stop. But for others, self-injury can become a long-term, repetitive behavior.

When to see a doctor

If you're injuring yourself, even in a minor way, or if you have thoughts of harming yourself, reach out for help. Any form of self-injury is a sign of bigger issues that need to be addressed.

Talk to someone you trust — such as a friend, loved one, doctor, spiritual leader, or a school counselor, nurse or teacher — who can help you take the first steps to successful treatment. While you may feel ashamed and embarrassed about your behavior, you can find supportive, caring and nonjudgmental help.

When a friend or loved one self-injures

If you have a friend or loved one who is self-injuring, you may be shocked and scared. Take all talk of self-injury seriously. Although you might feel that you'd be betraying a confidence, self-injury is too big a problem to ignore or to deal with alone. Here are some ways to help.

- **Your child.** You can start by consulting your pediatrician or other health care provider who can provide an initial evaluation or a referral to a mental health professional. Express your concern, but don't yell at your child or make threats or accusations.
- **Preteen or teenage friend.** Suggest that your friend talk to parents, a teacher, a school counselor or another trusted adult.
- **Adult.** Gently express your concern and encourage the person to seek medical and mental health treatment.

When to get emergency help

If you've injured yourself severely or believe your injury may be life-threatening, or if you think you may hurt yourself or attempt suicide, call 911 or your local emergency number immediately.

Also consider these options if you're having suicidal thoughts:

- Call your mental health professional if you're seeing one.
- Call a suicide hotline. In the U.S., call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255) or use their webchat on suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat.
- Seek help from your school nurse or counselor, teacher, doctor, or other health care provider.
- Reach out to a close friend or loved one.
- Contact a spiritual leader or someone else in your faith community.

Causes

There's no one single or simple cause that leads someone to self-injure. In general, self-injury may result from:

- **Poor coping skills.** Nonsuicidal self-injury is usually the result of an inability to cope in healthy ways with psychological pain.
- **Difficulty managing emotions.** The person has a hard time regulating, expressing or understanding emotions. The mix of emotions that triggers self-injury is complex. For instance, there may be feelings of worthlessness, loneliness, panic, anger, guilt, rejection, self-hatred or confused sexuality

Through self-injury, the person may be trying to:

- Manage or reduce severe distress or anxiety and provide a sense of relief
- Provide a distraction from painful emotions through physical pain
- Feel a sense of control over his or her body, feelings, or life situations
- Feel something — anything — even if it's physical pain, when feeling emotionally empty
- Express internal feelings in an external way
- Communicate depression or distressful feelings to the outside world

- Be punished for perceived faults

Risk factors

Most people who self-injure are teenagers and young adults, although those in other age groups also self-injure. Self-injury often starts in the preteen or early teen years, when emotions are more volatile and teens face increasing peer pressure, loneliness, and conflicts with parents or other authority figures.

Certain factors may increase the risk of self-injury, including:

- **Having friends who self-injure.** People who have friends who intentionally harm themselves are more likely to begin self-injuring.
- **Life issues.** Some people who injure themselves were neglected, were sexually, physically or emotionally abused, or experienced other traumatic events. They may have grown up and still remain in an unstable family environment, or they may be young people questioning their personal identity or sexuality. Some people who self-injure are socially isolated.
- **Mental health issues.** People who self-injure are more likely to be highly self-critical and be poor problem-solvers. In addition, self-injury is commonly associated with certain mental disorders, such as borderline personality disorder, depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders.
- **Alcohol or drug use.** People who harm themselves often do so while under the influence of alcohol or recreational drugs.

Complications

Self-injury can cause a variety of complications, including:

- Worsening feelings of shame, guilt and low self-esteem
- Infection, either from wounds or from sharing tools
- Permanent scars or disfigurement
- Severe, possibly fatal injury
- Worsening of underlying issues and disorders, if not adequately treated

Suicide risk

Although self-injury is not usually a suicide attempt, it can increase the risk of suicide because of the emotional problems that trigger self-injury. And the pattern of damaging the body in times of distress can make suicide more likely.

Prevention

There is no sure way to prevent your loved one's self-injuring behavior. But reducing the risk of self-injury includes strategies that involve both individuals and communities. Parents, family members, teachers, school nurses, coaches or friends can help.

- **Identify someone at risk and offer help.** Someone at risk can be taught resilience and healthy coping skills that can be used during periods of distress.
- **Encourage expansion of social networks.** Many people who self-injure feel lonely and disconnected. Helping someone form connections to people who don't self-injure can improve relationship and communication skills.
- **Raise awareness.** Learn about the warning signs of self-injury and what to do when you suspect it.
- **Encourage peers to seek help.** Peers tend to be loyal to friends. Encourage children, teens and young adults to avoid secrecy and reach out for help if they have a concern about a friend or loved one.
- **Talk about media influence.** News media, music and other highly visible outlets that feature self-injury may nudge vulnerable children and young adults to experiment. Teaching children critical thinking skills about the influences around them might reduce the harmful impact.

[By Mayo Clinic Staff](#) For more information – please go to the link below:

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/self-injury/symptoms-causes/syc-20350950>