

The Fourth of July is the cause of a great number of fires and burn injuries due to fireworks. According to national statistics, more than 10,000 citizens are injured each year by the misuse of common and illegally manufactured fireworks.

—Danville, VA.

Bottle rockets, black snakes, smoke bombs....oh, the memories. The Fourth of July is a time when families and friends unite, the grill is brought out of the garage and dusted off, ant hills are blown wide open from delicately placed black cats, and wheat farmers begin to sweat at the potential crop lost from unexpected trajectories of fireworks. And though this holiday carries the tradition of good times, thousands are haunted on this day by the horrifying experiences of being seriously burned.

If you or your family member becomes a number in this unfortunate statistic (10,000), then medical treatment and pain management will become significantly important to you. One aspect of serious burn injury that often is overlooked, is the psychiatric consequences of this type of trauma.

If you've ever blistered your finger on a stove, scolded your tongue on a steaming beverage, or darkened your skin with a match that burned faster than anticipated, you are well aware of the physical pain that burns cause. Burns are distinguished in severity by the location on the body, the degree of heat experienced, and the depth of the burn. Burns not only injure the skin, but can also damage muscle, cartilage and bone.

Pain management for burn victims is a challenging aspect of treatment. Assessment of discomfort, balancing the risks and benefits of pain medication, and identifying therapeutic levels of medication are all difficult. The University of Washington discovered that greater levels of acute pain are associated with negative long term psychological effects, such as depression, suicidal ideation, and post-traumatic stress disorder for as long as two years after the initial burn injury (2008).

Simultaneous to noting the impact of pain on mental health, it is also important to take note of the potential impact that psychological symptoms have on the degree of discomfort experienced by burn victims. John Hopkins University published a 2007 study which showed that depressive symptoms become a significant predictor of subsequent increases in pain and reductions in physical functioning. Anxiety, in contrast, predicts subsequent elevations in fatigue.

Failure to address either depression or anxiety, whether the cause or effect of pain, potentially complicates wound healing, increases risk of infections and extends hospital stays. Ensuring that you or your loved one receives mental health screening during treatment and post discharge is key when being treated for serious burn injuries.

Psychobabble wishes all of you a safe and fun 4th of July.