

Puncture Wounds from a Cactus

Barbara Brillhart RN PhD FNP-BC



A common injury found among those who collect rock or minerals in the desert is puncture wounds associated with cactus. This article presents the immediate and long term treatment of cactus puncture wounds, plus the prevention tips to avoid cactus spines.

Equipment used in the field to treat cactus puncture wounds includes: soap, water, gauze dressing, duct tape, white glue, tweezers, antiseptic gel or antibacterial gel, bandages, and a cold pack or ice.

The pain of the puncture wound is immediate and serves as a warning to take action to treat the injury. First apply duct tape to the area to remove the fine cactus spines. Removing the tape also removes the fine spines. Next, allow the wound to bleed a small amount to help prevent infection prior to removing the larger cactus spine. Wash the puncture wound with soap and water. Tweezers can be sterilized with flame for use. Grasp the end of the cactus spine with the tweezers, and then remove in the same angle that the spine entered. Pull in a slow, steady manner to remove the spine.

Some cactus spines are very small and have barbs that embed within the skin. If a portion of the cactus is attached to the skin, remove it with a comb or two sticks placed between the cactus and the skin. Flick the cactus portion away from the skin. You may require a magnifying glass to locate the smaller spines. If unable to remove the spines with tweezers, coat the spines with white glue and apply a gauze bandage over the glue. Allow the glue to dry, pull the bandage off and the cactus spines should come out with the bandage.

Another method of remove fine cactus spines is to apply a layer of hair remover wax over the cactus spines. Let the wax air-dry for approximately 5 minutes, then peel the wax off. The fine spines adhere to the wax and are removed with the peeling action.

Finally, wash the area with soap and water. Apply an antiseptic or antibacterial gel to the puncture sites, and then bandage the wound. Ice or a cold pack to the area helps reduce swelling.

Long term problems associated with cactus puncture wounds include inflammation, infection, cellulitis, and retained portions of the cactus spine. Cactus spine wounds are highly

inflammatory due to fungal coatings on the cactus spine or hypersensitive reactions. Common signs of a retained cactus spine include: sharp pain as pressure is applied to the site, discoloration of the skin, the wound fails to heal, a mass under the skin, and a cyst or abscess at the site. All of these problems require the care of a health care professional. It may be necessary to locate the hidden spine using CT scans, MRI, or ultrasound scans. The health care professional then can locate the spine for surgical removal. A tetanus booster is given for deep wounds if the last tetanus booster has been five years prior to the injury. A tetanus booster is given for any puncture wound if the person's prior booster is ten years or longer prior to the injury.

Prevention of cactus puncture wounds includes:

- Be watchful of the area for cactus. Cholla cacti are found on highly quartz-rich grounds (agate). Ocotillo cacti are found with limestone. Smaller cacti often prefer ground cover and can be hidden.**
- Wear boots and long pants.**
- Wear long sleeve shirts.**
- Do not touch cacti even if the spines look short and soft.**