How to remove tiny splinters

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Usually splinters end up in the hands of tiny tots as pictured on the left, and not next to the eye as pictured on the right.

More often than not, splinters are teensy-weensy and too small to grab with tweezers. Wondering how to remove tiny splinters? If the splinters in your child are near the skin surface and do not cause much discomfort, simply soak the affected area in warm soapy water several times a day for a few days. Fifteen minutes, two or three times a day for four days, works for most splinters.

Our bodies in general dislike foreign invaders and try to evict them. Water will help draw out tiny splinters by loosening up the skin holding the splinter. Soaking works well particularly for multiple hair-like splinters such as the ones obtained from sliding down an obstacle course rope. A helpful old home remedy is to put a paste of baking soda and water over the splinters for a few hours, which also softens the skin around a tiny splinter. Oil-based salves such as butter will not help pull out splinters. However, an over-the-counter

hydrocortisone cream will help calm irritation and a benzocaine-based cream (for kids over two years of age) can help with pain relief.

If a splinter seems easy to grab, then first gently wash the area with soap and water and pat dry. Don't soak an area with a "grab-able" wooden splinter for too long because the wood will soften and break apart. Next, wash your own hands and then clean a pair of tweezers with rubbing alcohol. Use the tweezers to grab hold of the splinter and with the tweezers pull smoothly. Take care to avoid breaking the splinter before it comes out.

If the splinter does break, or if you cannot easily grab the splinter's end because it does not protrude from the skin, here is another approach:

- Sterilize a sewing needle by first boiling it for one minute.
- Next, clean the needle with rubbing alcohol.
- Wash the area with the splinter well.
- Using the sterilized needle, pick away at the skin directly above the splinter. Use a magnifying glass if you have to, make sure you have good lighting, and for those middle-age parents like us, grab those reading glasses.
- Be careful not to go too deep- you will cause bleeding which makes visualization impossible.
- Continue to separate the skin with the needle gently until you can nudge the splinter out with the needle or grab it with your tweezers.

Since any break in the skin is a potential source of infection, after you remove the splinter, wash the wound well with soap and water. Flush the area with running water to remove any dirt that remains in the wound. See our post on wound care for further details on how to prevent infection. If the splinter is particularly dirty or deep, make sure your

child’s tetanus shot is up to date. Also, watch for signs of infection over the next few days: redness, pain, or thick discharge from the wound are all reasons to take your child to his doctor for evaluation.

Some splinters are just too difficult for parents to remove. If you are not comfortable removing it yourself of if your child can’t stay still for the extraction procedure, head over to your child’s doctor for removal.

The splinter near the baby’s eye pictured above did not bother her, but it certainly frustrated the child’s mom and the Emergency Room doctors who finally plucked it out.

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