HEALTH BASICS

First aid kit

A first aid kit is an organized set of supplies for immediate care.

WHAT IT IS
Organized supplies for immediate care of injuries and sudden illness

WHERE IT COMES UP
Home, travel, work, sports, vehicles, and emergencies

WHY IT MATTERS
Supports safer care until professional help is available

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a diagnosis or substitute for medical care

WHO TO ASK
Pharmacist, primary care clinician, or first aid trainer

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Regular inventory, seal, damage, and expiry-date checks

Overview

A first aid kit is a container of supplies used for immediate, basic care. It may help you clean and cover a small wound, protect yourself from body fluids, or support someone while professional help is arranged.

A first aid kit is not a disease, diagnosis, or treatment plan. Owning one also does not replace first aid training. The most useful kit is one you can find quickly, open easily, and use safely.

Kits can be kept at home, at work, in a vehicle, or with sports and travel equipment. The contents should match where the kit will be used. A hiking kit may need different supplies from a kitchen or workplace kit.

A basic kit may include:

Medicines are optional. If included, they should suit the people likely to use the kit. Keep them in their original, clearly labelled packaging. A pharmacist can help you check whether a non-prescription medicine is appropriate with your health conditions, allergies, pregnancy, or other medicines.

- Disposable non-latex gloves and a breathing barrier
- Adhesive bandages, sterile gauze, dressings, tape, and roller bandages

- An elastic wrap and triangular bandage
- Antiseptic wipes, hand sanitizer, and sterile saline
- Scissors, tweezers, a thermometer, and an instant cold pack
- An emergency blanket and written first aid instructions
- Emergency contact details and relevant medical information

How it works

A first aid kit provides tools; it does not decide what care is needed. Before using it, check that the area is safe. Avoid traffic, fire, electricity, chemicals, smoke, or other hazards.

Disposable gloves reduce contact with blood and other body fluids. Dressings and gauze can absorb blood and protect a wound. Bandages and tape hold dressings in place. Saline may be used to rinse some wounds or eyes, while cold packs can provide short-term cooling for certain soft-tissue injuries.

The kit should be arranged so urgent items are easy to reach. Supplies for controlling bleeding, gloves, and instructions should not be buried under less important items.

Some equipment needs training. A tourniquet, for example, is designed for life-threatening bleeding from an arm or leg. Incorrect use can cause harm or waste time. If you choose to carry one, obtain suitable first aid training and follow the product instructions and emergency-service guidance.

After any use, replace opened, contaminated, or missing items. Single-use supplies should not be reused. Wash reusable tools according to their instructions before returning them to the kit.

Why it matters for your health

Quick access to clean, suitable supplies can make basic first aid easier. A dressing can cover a minor wound, while gloves can reduce exposure to blood. An instruction card can help you remember essential steps during a stressful event.

A kit may also make it easier to share useful information. Emergency contacts, allergies, health conditions, and a current medicine list can help emergency personnel. Do not place original medical records or the only copy of important information in a kit that could be lost.

First aid has limits. A kit cannot rule out a fracture, internal injury, concussion, serious infection, poisoning, or other medical condition. It cannot replace emergency assessment when warning

signs are present.

Training matters as much as equipment. A practical first aid course can teach you how to assess responsiveness, call for help, perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation, use an automated external defibrillator, and control serious bleeding.

What can go wrong

A poorly maintained kit may contain expired medicines, damaged packaging, leaking products, or missing supplies. Adhesive can stop sticking, sterile packages can tear, and batteries in devices can lose power.

Unsafe storage creates other risks. Children may swallow medicines or small objects. Heat and freezing temperatures can damage some products, especially in a vehicle. Moisture can affect packaging and metal tools. Follow each product's storage instructions.

Using the wrong product may worsen an injury. Strong chemicals can damage tissue if poured into a wound. A tight wrap can reduce circulation. Medicine may cause an allergic reaction or interact with other medicines. Untrained use of specialist equipment can delay more useful care.

A kit may be relevant in situations such as cuts, burns, sprains, allergic reactions, poisoning, choking, concussion, fractures, or severe bleeding. These conditions are not made safe simply because supplies are available.

Call your local emergency number for signs such as:

For suspected poisoning, contact emergency services or your local poison information service. Do not make someone vomit unless a qualified service specifically tells you to do so.

Prompt medical assessment may also be needed for deep or gaping wounds, bites, punctures, eye injuries, possible broken bones, head injuries, wounds with retained objects, or increasing redness, swelling, warmth, pain, or drainage. A clinician can also check whether tetanus vaccination needs attention after certain wounds.

Small injuries that are improving can usually be monitored while following appropriate self-care instructions. Arrange routine care if healing is slower than expected or if you are unsure how to manage the injury.

- Severe or uncontrolled bleeding
- Trouble breathing, choking, or blue or grey lips
- Collapse, unresponsiveness, or a seizure that needs emergency help

- Signs of a severe allergic reaction, such as breathing difficulty
- Suspected stroke, heart attack, serious poisoning, or major trauma
- A serious burn, electrical injury, or chemical exposure

What you can do

Choose a sturdy, clearly marked, water-resistant container. Store it where adults can reach it quickly but young children cannot. Tell household members where it is kept.

Tailor the contents to your setting and needs:

Inspect the kit on a regular schedule and after every use. Check expiry dates, seals, batteries, cleanliness, and quantities. Keep a simple list inside the lid so missing items are obvious.

Ask a pharmacist how to store and dispose of medicines. Do not use an item when its packaging is damaged or its label cannot be read.

Consider taking an accredited first aid course. If you already have training, refresh it as recommended by the training organization. Skills can become harder to recall when they are not practised.

- Record emergency contacts, allergies, and current medicines
- Add prescribed emergency medicine only for the named person
- Keep medicines in original packaging with readable instructions
- Include extra supplies for travel, outdoor activity, or remote locations
- Check workplace rules for required first aid equipment
- Consider a smaller kit for a vehicle or day bag

Common questions

Is a ready-made kit enough?

A commercial kit is a useful starting point, but check what it contains. Add items that fit your household, activities, destination, and level of training. Remove products you cannot identify or use safely.

Should I keep medicines in the kit?

You may include suitable non-prescription medicines, but they are not essential. Ask a pharmacist about allergies, interactions, pregnancy, children's products, and existing health

conditions. Follow the package directions rather than transferring medicines into unlabelled containers.

Can prescribed emergency medicine go in the kit?

It can be stored there if the kit remains quickly accessible to the person for whom it was prescribed. Keep the dispensing label and instructions with it. Check storage requirements and expiry dates, and do not share prescribed medicine.

Can I leave a kit in the car?

A vehicle kit can be useful, but cars may become very hot or cold. These conditions can damage medicines, adhesives, batteries, and other products. Check labels and replace anything exposed outside its recommended storage range.

How often should I replace the whole kit?

There is no single replacement date for an entire kit. Inspect each item and replace it when it is used, expired, contaminated, damaged, or no longer works. The container itself can remain in use if it is clean and protective.

Do I need a tourniquet?

Not every household kit needs one. It is intended for life-threatening limb bleeding, not ordinary cuts. If your activities or location make one appropriate, use a recognized product and complete hands-on training.

Sources

- American Red Cross. Anatomy of a First Aid Kit
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC Yellow Book: Travel Health Kits
- National Health Service. First Aid
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Where and How to Dispose of Unused Medicines
- Ready.gov. First Aid Kit