



## Cutting and Self-Harm

Cutting is a form of self-injury in which the person makes small cuts on his or her body, usually on the arms, legs, and stomach. Often times these cuts are made using razor blades, fingernails, pieces of glass, knives, and other sharp objects. Many of these cuts are superficial, and look more like scratches than cuts. However, they can accidentally become deeper, more frequent, and/or infected and leave physical scars and marks. Although cutting may look like a suicide attempt, it is something very different.

It's difficult for many people to understand. But for kids and adolescents, cutting helps them control their emotional pain and makes them feel the things that they can't put into words. Self-injury can serve as a coping strategy for unhappy kids.

Kids and adolescents who cut and self-injure often experience the following:

- school stress
- eating disorders
- peer pressure
- a history of sexual, physical, or verbal abuse
- family conflicts or changes

Self-injury can also be a symptom for psychiatric problems like depression, borderline personality disorder, anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia.

David Rosen, MD, MPH, is Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Michigan and director of the Section for Teenage and Young Adult Health at the University of Michigan Health Systems in Ann Arbor. He offers parents tips on what to watch for:

- Small, linear cuts. "The most typical cuts are very linear, straight line, often parallel like railroad ties carved into forearm, the upper arm, sometimes the legs," Rosen says. "Some people cut words into themselves. If they're having body image issues, they may cut the word 'fat.' If they're having trouble at school, it may be 'stupid,' 'loser,' 'failure,' or a big 'L.' Those are the things we see pretty regularly."
- Unexplained cuts and scratches, particularly when they appear regularly. "I wish I had a nickel for every time someone says, 'The cat did it,'" says Rosen.
- Mood changes like depression or anxiety, out-of-control behavior, changes in relationships, communication, and school performance. Kids who are unable to manage day-to-day stresses of life are vulnerable to cutting, says Rosen.

Over time, the cutting typically escalates -- occurring more often, with more and more cuts each time.

If you suspect your child is cutting or using self-harm, it is important to address it right away. Kids and adolescents usually try to keep their cutting secret and hidden. If you notice cuts and marks, talk with your child about what is going on, and share with them your concern and suspicion. It is better to err on the side of caution and open communication, and therefore, it is recommended that psychotherapy should be the first step in treatment. If the cutting continues or escalates, then an inpatient treatment program may be necessary.