

A Builder's Real-Life First-Aid Kit

Bandages, bee-sting medicine and everything else a carpenter shouldn't leave home without

by Jim Kelleher

My qualification to write this article is that I am 50 years old and I still have all my fingers. I have mashed, bashed, sliced and punctured them, and last year I fell off an extension ladder and broke my ankle. But I am not accident-prone. I simply work with tools to earn my living.

I am also self-employed, which means that no one is going to rush to me when something bad happens. As a result, I work slowly and methodically, and when I hurt myself, I stop and try to fix myself. And I can't fix myself if I don't have

the right tools to do the job. I put together my first-aid kit the same way I acquired my carpentry tools. At first, I started out with an empty box. Then I stuffed that box with everything I could find and struggled to carry the damn thing. Now I have a small box full of essentials.

I didn't even own a toolbox, not to mention a bandage box, when I started in 1970 as a carpenter's apprentice for the Building Trades Council in New York City. I had contact lenses, a beard that got me the nickname "Abe" (as in Lin-

coln) and many illusions about the romance of building. The ceiling contractor who hired me loaned my body to a commercial-partitions contractor. I never touched a stick of wood, instead spending those early days and nights as a carpenter unloading drywall trucks. When I wasn't stacking drywall, I toted boxes of ceiling tile and bundles of metal studs.

One afternoon, my education as an apprentice was about to conclude with a 30-second demonstration on the use of aviation snips for cutting metal crown molding. My foreman, Andy Levandowski, was showing me how to cut and bend the metal.

"Then you snap it like this," he said. The molding neatly broke into two pieces, except for the tiny shard of metal that immediately flew into my left eye. My eye reddened and watered. My contact lens came out undamaged, and Andy didn't see the metal in my eye. But I wasn't so sure I would ever see out of that eye again. Muttering and swearing, Andy ordered me to the emergency room but not before making me promise that I would hurry back because two trucks were due. "Better take a cab," he said. At the emergency room, a nurse doused both my eyes with a sterile solution and aimed a flashlight into my pupils. She couldn't find anything. The metal had probably flushed itself out. I would have cried if I'd had any tears left.

So I gave up my contact lenses for prescription safety glasses. They protect my eyes from airborne bits of molding and flashing, loose carbide tips on sawblades and the hidden nails I sometimes hit when recycling old building materials. I mention these safety glasses to illustrate

JIM KELLEHER'S FIRST-AID ESSENTIALS

Always use latex gloves.

A first-aid manual: What good is the kit if you don't know how to use it?

Gauze bandages and Q-Tips for cleaning and dressing wounds

Antibacterial ointment for cuts and splinters

Aspirin for minor aches and pains



Jimmy Four-Eyes's primary first-aid principle: Work safely, and you can keep your bandages in the truck. But you should keep an eye patch and some saline solution in your first-aid kit anyway, just in case.

I lived to see other injuries. One day while working in a skyscraper at Columbus Circle, I dropped a 10-ft. sheet of drywall onto my big toe as I was loading the sheets into the building's freight elevator. I started hopping up and down as the cage began its long ascent to the 65th floor.

The elevator operator was an Italian gray-beard named Tony. In his early life, he was an ironworker. Then he became a union rep. Now he was just Old Tony. After the construction supervisor, Old Tony was the most important boss in the building. He sat on a stool in his freight elevator and decided what materials went up, what went down, and when.

"Abe," Tony said, "shut up and stick some ice on your foot." He opened his blue lunchbox, which contained a half-dozen Budweiser bottles sitting in glistening chunks of ice. Tony produced a small plastic bag, which I filled with ice and placed on my foot. Then he stopped the elevator midfloor to enjoy a cold one while I was icebound, both of us ignoring the call buttons on his console that were popping like red mushrooms. Another lesson learned the hard way: Always carry a chemical ice pack. Ice prevents swelling and pain.

Before I could limp out of the elevator with the load of drywall, Tony demanded his plastic bag. He told me he needed it to bag some unlucky carpenter's cut-off finger. I thought this might have been a joke, until I gave it some thought and realized he was probably serious. It wasn't a bad idea.

I now carry my own first-aid kit rather than depend on the kindnesses of people like Old Tony. I'm no longer in New York (where, believe it or not, people can be kind), and I often find myself alone on a job. Among the essentials I carry in my first-aid kit, I count the following:

Tweezers. Not ordinary tweezers, but an extraordinary pair that retrieve the meanest and deepest splinters (especially of the pressure-treated and metal



Smelling salts

Splint immobilizes damaged digits; fingertip dressings are for nicks and cuts.



Cold compress reduces swelling; Ace bandage is for sprains.

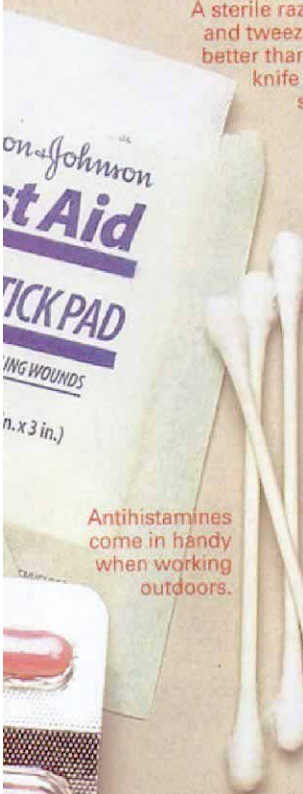


A sterile razor blade and tweezers work better than a utility knife for deep splinters.



Scissors for cutting bandages or clothing

Antihistamines come in handy when working outdoors.



variety). This tool is worthless if you don't stop what you're doing to pull out the splinter. I used to wait until I got home to extract all my splinters. By then, the foreign objects would be deeply em-

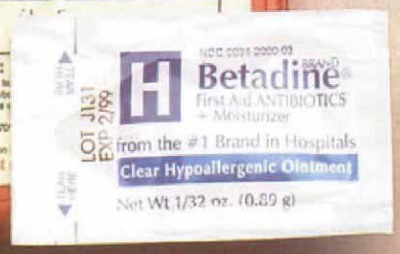
bedded and coated with tar. My wounds were red, swollen and sometimes infected, forcing me to perform major surgery with tweezers, scissors and dirty utility knives. I was very tough and very stu-

"I now carry lots of Band-Aids . . . and don't have to sand out bloodstains from window and door casings."

pid. Like anything else, don't carry tweezers if you won't spend the time to use them.

Bandages. I now carry lots of Band-Aids and sterile compresses, along with waterproof first-aid

tape (I don't dress my wounds in duct tape anymore). Fingertip dressings are handy for people like me who nick and cut their fingers a lot. They are easy to apply, and I don't have to sand out bloodstains from window and door casings.



Sunblock is handy for all seasons. A sterile cleaning solution is for cuts and abrasions.

Allergy cream for stings and bites. For severe allergies, a bee-sting kit can be prescribed.



Alcohol preps and burn cream; gauze and tape for dressing wounds



Drops for irritated or dry eyes

Insect repellent and lip balm



The list goes on: sterile razor blades, Q-Tips, antibacterial ointment, alcohol preps. These things seem obvious, until you need them and don't have them. Aspirin. An Ace bandage for sprains or carpenter's elbow. A large triangle bandage, smelling salts and a rubber tourniquet for worst-case emergencies.

Less obvious, at least to those who work indoors, are such things as high-index sun-block and insect repellent. I also carry a bee-sting kit with injectable epinephrine and chewable antihistamines. I got it after I pulled a split fascia board from an old house and yellowjackets stung me on the neck. You will need a prescription from your doctor, and you shouldn't administer the shot to anyone but the person it has been prescribed for because someone might be more allergic to the antihistamine than they are to the bee sting.

Whether it's an off-the-shelf box or one like mine, which I assembled myself, a first-aid kit won't help if you don't know first aid. Take time to learn the basics, and it might pay off big, sometimes in strange ways. When I was teaching an adult-education class, I was demonstrating how to cut a mortise-and-tenon joint. As I cleaned out the mortise, I was mortified to see blood dripping from my hand and pooling in the bottom of the hole. I parlayed this accident into my lesson by illustrating the value of sharp cutting tools and direct pressure on open wounds. I squeezed that cut finger pretty hard to cover my embarrassment.

That episode, it turned out, was nothing compared to the time I stuck my forefinger into a bandsaw while teaching a high-school shop class. Holy cow. Holy exclamations. I squeezed and elevated my lacerated digit over my head and ran for the nurse's office. "Let me see it," the nurse said. I was afraid to let go, not being quite sure if there was anything left to see. Fortunately, many stitches later, I was repaired.

It's no lie: Home building is inherently dangerous

by Zachary Gaulkin

As Jim Kelleher reminds us, we warn our readers about the dangers of home building (see p. 12). According to Mark Kiessling, director of Pre-Hospital and Disaster Medicine at Yale-New Haven Hospital in New Haven, Connecticut, this statement is truer than you might think. Construction is among the top three most-hazardous occupations in the United States, along with agriculture and mining. Two construction workers are killed every day, on average, and construction-related accidents account for

more nonfatal injuries than any other industry, according to statistics compiled by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, the Centers for Disease Control and the National Safety Council. The most common serious injuries are caused by falls and electrocution, Kiessling says. Nonfatal injuries most commonly are cuts and bruises to the hands and arms.

"The most dramatic injuries, in my opinion, are caused by power nail guns," says Kiessling. "Statistics don't bear out a high probability, but

nailing your hand or foot to a 2x4 is hard to beat for visual impact."

We asked Kiessling to read Jim Kelleher's article and let us know if Kelleher forgot to include anything in his first-aid kit. Not much, it turns out, but Kiessling did offer these suggestions:

- If you are bleeding, stay away from aspirin, which will make you bleed more and longer.

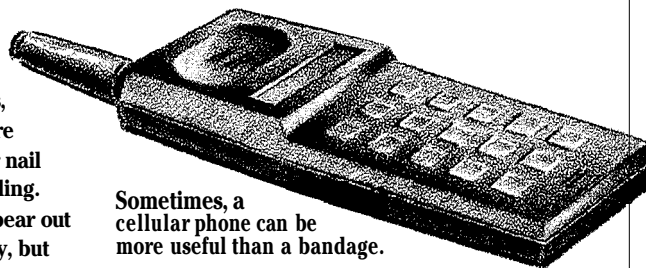
Acetaminophen may be a better choice.

- If you haven't had a tetanus booster shot in the past five years, get one. It'll save you a tetanus shot later.

- Carry a local emergency number (it may not be 911).

- Carry a cellular phone, especially in remote locations.

(For a real-life job-site injury story, see "Cross Section," p. 50.)



Sometimes, a cellular phone can be more useful than a bandage.

First aid only goes so far, and some people aren't as lucky. The college instructor who taught my industrial-arts certification classes told us to keep our shop classes small. He then violated this rule by letting his administrators swamp him with eager people like me. One afternoon, as I returned from a coffee break, I saw a swarm around the table saw. I had mercifully missed an industrial-grade accident: A future shop teacher lost most of his fingers that day.

Correct safety practice might have prevented the accident; there was little a first-aid kit could have done.

As a shop teacher myself, I tried to teach basic first aid: how to stop bleeding, how to treat for shock, how not to make bad situations worse. I think I did well to include first aid in my curriculum. Of course, it didn't stop a student from pointing his electric drill at the web between his thumb and index finger. He genuinely was surprised when the bit went right through. "I thought it just drilled wood," he told me. You can see why I burned

out as a shop teacher. What I don't understand is how I spent 12 years teaching people the correct use of power tools without any major accidents. Except, of course, to myself.

There are two first-aid materials I saved for last because you should always remember them: latex gloves and a manual on emergency first-aid procedures. These items should be on everyone's list. No one will expect you to remember all the pressure points or how to treat for electrical shock when someone stumbles into the power lines with a ladder. But if you carry a first-aid manual, you can look it up. It's nice if you can offer an injured person something besides a cigarette and a ride to the hospital.

That's it for my kit, except for the painful subject of health insurance. A good first-aid kit should have a health-insurance policy behind it. I carry an inexpensive emergency-room policy I bought from AAA Motor Club. It paid off big when I fell off the ladder.

I probably left out something important, so please write to the editor and tell him what I forgot (sidebar above). After all, he always reminds us that "home building is inherently dangerous." Does he mean the houses or us builders? □

Jim Kelleher is a carpenter, writer and poet. He left New York City and now lives in Goshen, CT. Photos by Scott Phillips, except where noted.



The author can still count to ten. It may not make Jim Kelleher an expert, but so far none of his many brushes with disaster has been permanent.