What works for

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For the second year running, and much to the dismay of locals and tourists alike, our beaches are infested by the Mediterranean Mauve Stinger, Pelagia noctiluca, so called because it is a purple coloured, open sea (pelagic) jellyfish which exhibits a weak bioluminescence and therefore shines with a faint green light in the dark. By popular account, this seems to be a particularly bad year, and jellyfish stings are increasingly being attended to by family physicians, and occasionally by dermatologists. A number of articles on the subject have appeared in the local press.

Sea water
Sterile saline
Vinegar (5% acetic acid)
Baking soda
Isopropyl alcohol
Papain (meat tenderizer)
Urine

Box 1: First Aid Treatment of Jellyfish Stings

Box 2: Complications of Pelagia noctiluca stings

Secondary infection
Scarring, including keloid formation
Pigmented striae
Ulceration and necrosis
Granuloma formation
Lichenification from persistent rubbing

What then, does one do - or not do?

Management of jellyfish stings is targeted towards nematocyst inactivation, pain control and local wound care.

Rubbing the skin over the affected area will cause further nematocysts to discharge and should be avoided. Similarly, fresh water (or ice) will enhance nematocyst activation and should not be used on the wound.

Any adherent tentacles should first be lifted off, ideally with a pair of forceps, and not scraped. The area should then ideally be copiously irrigated with sterile saline which will inactive any nematocysts still adherent to the skin. Since not everybody packs sterile saline into their beach bags, sea water may have to do, but this risks introducing marine pathogens into the wound.

In the event that nematocysts still adhere to the wound after...
Jellyfish stings?

Irritation, then it probably does no harm to cover the area with an aerosol spray shaving cream and shave them off with a razor blade or credit card edge.

Ice packs, firmly applied to the wound and held there for 10 minutes are effective in relieving pain. Condensation on the surface of the pack must not be allowed to accumulate, as this effectively delivers fresh water to the wound. Ice should not be applied to the wound, as the fresh water from the melting ice will activate undischarged nematocysts. There is no evidence that topical anesthetics, like benzocaine or lidocaine, increase systemic absorption of anaesthetics. No account must the wound be exposed to sunlight, as this will almost certainly result in severe, persistent post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation which is very difficult to treat.

References
3. Lindsay D. No controlling or predicting jellyfish infestations: The Malta Independent on Sunday, June 18 2006.

Bibliography

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Even tough cases need a gentle touch

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