

Water Safety

When the weather turns warm, everyone wants to be in or around the water. Hanging out at the pool or the beach on a hot day is a great way to beat the heat.

Between having fun and checking out the lifeguards, most people don't think much about water safety — but they should. For people between the ages of 5 and 24, drowning is the second leading cause of accidental death. It doesn't have to be that way, though. Most water-related accidents can be avoided by knowing how to stay safe and following a few simple guidelines.

Swimming Smarts

"Buddy up!" That's what swimming instructors say. Always swim with a partner, every time — whether you're swimming in a backyard pool or in a lake. Even experienced swimmers can become tired or get muscle cramps, which might make it difficult to get out of the water. When people swim together, they can help each other or go for help in case of an emergency.

Get skilled. Speaking of emergencies, it's good to be prepared. Learning some life-saving techniques, such as CPR and rescue techniques, can help you save a life. A number of organizations offer free classes for both beginning and experienced swimmers and boaters. Check with your YMCA or YWCA, local hospital, or chapter of the Red Cross.

Know your limits. Swimming can be a lot of fun — and you might want to stay in the water as long as possible. If you're not a good swimmer or you're just learning to swim, don't go in water that's so deep you can't touch the bottom and don't try to keep up with skilled swimmers. That can be hard, especially when your friends are challenging you — but it's a pretty sure bet they'd rather have you safe and alive.

If you are a good swimmer and have had lessons, keep an eye on friends who aren't as comfortable or as skilled as you are. If it seems like they (or you) are getting tired or a little uneasy, suggest that you take a break from swimming for a while.

Swim in safe areas only. It's a good idea to swim only in places that are supervised by a lifeguard. No one can anticipate changing ocean currents, riptides, sudden storms, or other hidden dangers. In the event that something does go wrong, lifeguards are trained in rescue techniques.

Swimming in an open body of water (like a river, lake, or ocean) is different from swimming in a pool. You need more energy to handle the currents and other conditions in the open water.

If you do find yourself caught in a current, don't panic and don't fight the current. Swim with the current, gradually trying to make your way back to shore as you do so. Even a very good swimmer who tries to swim against a strong current will get worn out. If you're going to be swimming in an open body of water, it's a great idea to take swimming lessons that provide you with tips on handling unexpected hazards.

Some areas with extremely strong currents are off limits when it comes to swimming. Do your research so you know where not to swim.

Be careful about diving. Teens are more likely than any other age group to suffer diving injuries, many of which can result in permanent spinal cord damage or death. Only dive in areas that are known to be safe for diving, such as the deep end of a supervised pool. If an area is posted with "No Diving" or "No Swimming" signs, pay attention to them. If you see a "No Diving" sign, that means the water isn't safe for a head-first entry. Even if you plan to jump

in feet first, check the water's depth before you leap to make sure there are no hidden rocks or other hazards. Lakes or rivers can be cloudy and hazards can be hard to see.

Watch the sun. Sun reflecting off the water or off sand can intensify the burning rays. You might not feel sunburned when the water feels cool and refreshing, but the pain will catch up with you later — so remember to reapply sunscreen frequently and cover up much of the time.

Drink plenty of fluids. It's easy to get dehydrated in the sun, particularly if you're active and sweating. Keep up with fluids — particularly water — to prevent dehydration. Dizziness, feeling lightheaded, or nausea can be signs of dehydration and overheating.

Getting too cool. Speaking of temperature, it's possible to get too cool. How? Staying in very cool water for long periods can lower your body temperature. A temperature of 70° Fahrenheit (20° Celsius) is positively balmy on land, but did you know that water below 70° Fahrenheit will feel cold to most swimmers? Your body temperature drops far more quickly in water than it does on land. And if you're swimming, you're using energy and losing body heat even faster than if you were keeping still. Monitor yourself when swimming in cold water and stay close to shore. If feel your body start to shiver or your muscles cramp up, get out of the water quickly; it doesn't take long for hypothermia to set in.

Alcohol and water never mix. Alcohol is involved in numerous water-related injuries and up to half of all water-related deaths. The statistics for teenage guys are particularly scary: One half of all adolescent male drownings are tied to alcohol use.

At the Water Park

OK, so you do more splashing than swimming, but it's just as important to know your skill level at the water park as it is at the pool. Take a moment to read warnings and other signs. And make sure you do slide runs feet first or you'll put yourself at risk for a ride that's a lot less fun — one to your doctor or dentist.

Boating Safety

More people die in boating accidents every year than in airplane crashes or train wrecks, but a little common sense can make boating both enjoyable and safe. If you are going to go boating, make sure the captain or person handling the boat is experienced and competent.

Alcohol and water still don't mix. One third of boating deaths are alcohol related. Alcohol distorts a person's judgment no matter where they are — but that distortion is even greater on the water. The U.S. Coast Guard warns people about a condition called **boater's fatigue**, which means that the wind, noise, heat, and vibration of the boat all combine to wear you down when you're on the water.

Because there are no road signs or lane markers on the water and the weather can be unpredictable, it's important to be able to think quickly and react well under pressure. If you're drinking, this can be almost impossible.

Personal flotation devices. It's always a good idea for everyone on the boat to wear a Coast Guard-approved life jacket, whether the boat is a large speedboat or a canoe — and whether you're a good swimmer or not. Wearing a life jacket (also known as a personal flotation device, or PFD) is the law in some states for certain age groups, and you could face a stiff penalty for breaking it. Your state may also require that you wear an approved life jacket for water skiing and other on-water activities. Wearing a PFD is like wearing a helmet while biking. It may take a few minutes to get used to it, but it definitely can be a lifesaver. Don't leave land without it.

Stay in touch. Before going out on a boat, let somebody on land know where you are going and about how long you'll be out. That way, if you do get into trouble, someone will have an idea of where to look for you. If you're going to be on the water for a long time, it's a good idea to have a radio with you so you can check the weather reports. Water conducts electricity, so if you hear a storm warning, get off the water as quickly as you can.

Jet skis. If you're using jet skis or personal watercraft, follow the same rules as you do for boating. You should also check out the laws in your area governing the use of personal watercraft. Some states won't allow people under a certain age to operate these devices; others require you to take a course or pass a test before you can ride one.

Now Have Fun!

The pool and the beach are great places to learn new skills, socialize, and check out everyone's new bathing suit. So don't let paying attention to safety turn you off. Being prepared will make you feel more comfortable and in charge.

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