

Swimming

Splashing, wading, and paddling — it must mean a great day in the water. Playing at the beach, at a water park, by a lake, or in a pool can be a real treat on a hot day.

Swimming is a lot of fun, but drowning is a real danger. Even kids who know how to swim can drown, so let's find out how to stay safe in the water.

Why Is It Important to Be Safe in the Water?

Fish are able to live and breathe in water, but people need air to breathe. People drown when too much water gets into their lungs. When that happens, the lungs can't put oxygen in the blood. Then, too little oxygen gets to the brain and the rest of the body.

Drowning is the second most common cause of death from injuries among kids under the age of 14. Drowning can happen so fast — sometimes in less than 2 minutes after a person's head goes under the water. That leaves very little time for someone to help.

Many drownings and near-drownings happen when a kid accidentally falls into a swimming pool. But accidents can happen anywhere — at someone's home or even at your own house, and that's why you need to know how to be safe around water.

Swimming Pools

Pools are awesome! What could be better than a dip in the pool and fun in the sun? But it's important to remember that a pool's sides and bottom are usually made of concrete, a rock-hard material. A slip or fall could be painful and dangerous.

Have you seen those big numbers painted on the side of the pool? Those are called **depth markers** — they tell you how deep the water is at that point. You should always look before you jump into a pool. Also, only dive off the diving board. Never dive off the side of the pool unless an adult says that the water is deep enough. The water may be shallower than you think. If you hit the bottom . . . ouch! You might get knocked out or you could hurt your neck very badly.

Test the pool's water temperature before you plunge in. Cold water can shock your body and make your blood pressure and heart rate go up. You might open your mouth to yell and accidentally breathe in some water. Cold water also can slow your muscles, making it hard to swim.

Other rules to follow:

- Always have an adult watch you when you are in the pool — even in your own backyard. Never go in the pool if there is no adult around. Always call an adult or lifeguard if there is an emergency.
- Gates are around pools for a reason — to keep kids away from the water when there isn't a lifeguard or adult around to watch them. Never go through any pool gates when they are closed. Stay safe and stay out!
- Always obey pool rules.
- Swim with a buddy.
- If you're learning to swim, ask your mom or dad to make sure your flotation devices are Coast Guard-approved.
- Walk slowly in the pool area. Don't run.
- Swim at a depth that is safe for you. If you're just learning to swim, stay in the shallow end.

- Don't push or jump on others. You could accidentally hurt someone or yourself.
- Toys to help you float come in many shapes and sizes (an inner tube, air mattress, or beach ball, for example). Although they're fun and can help you while you learn to swim, what they **can't** do is save a life. They're toys that can lose air or float away.
- Don't chew gum or eat while you swim — you could choke.

Lakes and Ponds

Lots of kids swim in streams, lakes, or ponds. Take extra care when swimming in these beautiful places. You can't always see the bottom of the lake or pond, so you don't always know the depth of the water. This is another reason to always swim with an adult.

Although the fish swimming around won't hurt you, some ponds and lakes may hide jagged rocks, broken bottles, or trash. Wear something to protect your feet. Also, watch out for weeds and grass, which can trap even a good swimmer. If you panic and try to yank yourself free, you may get even more tangled. Instead, shake and pull your arms and legs **slowly** to work yourself loose and call for an adult's help.

If you're going out on a boat, always wear a life jacket. (Again, the life jacket should be Coast Guard-approved.) Even if you are a good swimmer, something could cause the boat to tip over and you could be trapped underneath.

Beaches

It's hard to resist a day on the beach, but you'll need to know some safety rules for swimming in the ocean. Swimming in the ocean is trickier than the pool because of waves and currents, which can change. When you first get to the beach, check with the lifeguard to find out how strong the waves are. Some places fly flags or write notes on a chalkboard to give swimmers an idea of what conditions are like.

Waves can knock you down or push you to the ocean floor. Stay close to an adult or get out of the water when the waves get rough. People also get into trouble when they start to panic or become too tired to swim. It's important to know your limits, so if you start feeling tired, get out of the water and rest for a while.

In some places, swimmers may run into strong undertows or ocean currents. Rip currents (also called riptides) are so strong that they can carry swimmers away from shore before they know what's happening. If you are caught in a current, swim parallel to the shore (alongside the shore) rather than toward the shore until the water stops pulling you, then swim diagonally back to shore. If you can't get back to the beach, tread water and wave for a lifeguard's help. In this situation, it's really important to stay calm and not panic.

You probably won't see any sharks (although a friendly dolphin may splash by) where you are swimming. But you might run into some jellyfish or Portuguese man-of-wars. These umbrella-shaped, nearly clear animals can grow to be as large as several feet in diameter! They are often found floating near the shore. Getting stung is no fun — it can hurt and blister your skin. If you get stung, tell an adult as soon as possible.

Other rules to follow:

- Never swim alone!
- Always swim where a lifeguard can see you and in areas that are marked for swimmers to use.
- Wear protective footwear if surfaces are rough or rocky.
- Don't swim out too far.
- Never pretend to be drowning. The lifeguard may take you seriously.
- Don't swim close to piers — those big, wooden structures that jut out into the water. If the water moves



What's a Riptide?

Actually, it's an ocean current that has nothing to do with the tides. A rip current happens as water that's built up onshore returns to the ocean (all those waves need to go somewhere!). Rip currents are often found near fixed objects, like piers and reefs, which is why these are "no swimming" areas. If you swim into a rip current (you'll feel it pulling you out to sea), don't panic. Swim parallel to shore until you feel the pull stop. You can then swim back to shore.

suddenly, you could hit a piling or a rock.

- Store drinks in plastic containers at the beach — broken glass bottles and bare feet don't mix.
- Face the waves, instead of turning your back on them. Then you'll know what's coming.

Water Parks

Kids love water parks — and why shouldn't they? Wave pools, giant slides, and squirting fountains are a lot of fun. To stay safe, find out what each attraction is like and how deep the water is. Some wave pools can get rough, so it's a good idea to have an adult nearby.

Here are other water park safety tips:

- Wear a life jacket if you don't know how to swim or if you're not a strong swimmer.
- Read all of the signs before going on a ride. Make sure you are tall enough, old enough, and don't have any of the medical conditions that are listed. If you have questions, check with a parent or ask the lifeguard.
- Always make sure there's a lifeguard at each ride and listen to his or her instructions. Wait until the rider ahead of you has passed a safe point for you to go down the slide.
- Always go down the water slide face up and feet first. This is the safe and correct way to ride.
- When you go from ride to ride, don't run — it's slippery! Also, remember that each ride is different. Read each sign and note how deep the water is in the pool.

But I Know How to Swim!

It's important to know your limits when it comes to playing in the water. You could develop a cramp (where a muscle in your body suddenly tenses up and causes pain) or other physical problem that makes it hard to swim. If you get a cramp, get out of the water for a while and give your muscles a rest.

Here are some other good water safety tips:

- Learn to swim. Ask your parents to contact your local American Red Cross or community center for information on boating or water safety courses.
- Always put on plenty of sunscreen before you go outside. It's also a good idea to wear sunglasses and a hat to protect your skin from the sun's harmful rays.
- Drink plenty of water and fluids when you're outside swimming and playing so you don't become dehydrated.
- Stop swimming or boating as soon as you see or hear a storm. Remember, lightning is electricity — electricity and water are a dangerous combination.
- Don't swim in the dark.
- Go into the water slowly to make sure the temperature feels comfortable and it's not too cold. If you're shivering or start to feel your muscles cramping up, it may be because the water is too cold. This is not safe, so get out of the water immediately.
- Germs might lurk in the water that can make a person sick with diarrhea or other illnesses. So make sure not to swallow the water. And to help keep the water as clean as possible: shower with soap before going swimming, wash your hands after using the bathroom, and don't swim if you're sick.
- Wherever you're swimming, **do** have a waterfall of fun!

Reviewed by: Rupal Christine Gupta, MD

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