

Swim Area Safety

#SwimAreaSafety

Swim Area Safety: Summary

Millions enjoy water activities in pools, lakes, rivers, and oceans. However, there are also over 4000 drowning deaths per year that are both predictable and preventable. Drowning prevention strategies include learning how to swim, providing supervision by those who can prevent, recognize and respond to drowning situations, such as lifeguards and water watchers, and understanding how risks vary with location. This message focuses on features that affect swim area safety, such as water depth, underwater hazards, water quality, water clarity, water temperature, and water movement. A sensible approach to safeguard yourself and those in your group is to select designated swim areas with lifeguards. The link at the end provides additional information.

- **Water Depth** - Depths approaching chin height or greater pose significant risk to weak or nonswimmers who have not learned to support themselves in deep water. Those lacking such skill often drown quickly and silently after entering deep water. Swimming groups that contain weak or non-swimmers should always choose areas with known depths, ideally with gently sloping bottoms and buoy lines indicating depth ranges. Young children should be closely supervised and kept within arm's reach. If nonswimmers cannot be isolated from deep water, it is essential that they wear properly fitted, approved life jackets, both in pools and natural waters.
- **Underwater Hazards** – Drop-offs, rocks, trash, debris, weeds, stumps and muddy bottoms threaten safety and enjoyment. Diving into unknown water is extremely dangerous. Carefully check for hazards before starting activities. Choose a maintained, designated swim area if available. Go elsewhere if unavoidable hazards are present.
- **Water Quality** – Pollution and contamination pose health risks. Obey warning signs. Avoid areas with foam, scum, algae, or flocks of waterfowl.
- **Water Clarity** – Visibility in natural waters ranges from clear to opaque. Murky water makes it difficult to find someone who submerges due to drowning, heart attack, stroke, or other medical condition. Staying in shallow water and/or wearing life jackets are prudent measures when the water is not clear.
- **Water Temperature** – Choose areas with comfortable water temperatures. Check water temperature before entering and be wary when the water feels cold. Understand cold water shock and hypothermia.
- **Moving Water – River Currents.** Currents in rivers and some lakes pose risks for all swimming abilities. Currents may be hard to see and very difficult to swim against, so wearing a life jacket is a wise precaution. If caught in a river current, do not fight against it, but swim across the flow to reach safety downstream. Do not swim in whitewater. Stay away from high water in flooded rivers, streams, ditches and canals.
- **Moving Water – Rip Currents.** Rip currents are commonly found on all surf beaches, including the Great Lakes. If caught in a rip current, relax - it will not pull you under. Don't swim against the current. Instead, you may be able to escape by swimming out of the current in a direction following the shoreline, or toward breaking waves, then at an angle toward the beach. You may also be able to escape by floating or treading water if the current circulates back toward shore. If you feel you will be unable to reach shore, draw attention to yourself. If you need help, yell and wave for assistance. Do not enter the water to help someone caught in a rip unless you are

trained to do so and have a flotation aid. Instead, throw a floating object toward them and call for professional help. Learn more about rip currents, at this [link](#) or the one below.

- **Moving Water – Waves and Surf.** Oceans and large lakes may have breaking and spilling waves. If in doubt, don't go out. If walking near a surf beach, stay well back, as larger waves may surprise you. If you plan to swim, face the waves so that you can anticipate them. Stay away from beaches with approaching storms which often produce strong rip currents and large waves prior to reaching shore. If storm hazard flags are flying, stay away.

Additional Safety Tips

- **Designated Swim Areas** – Private, state, and federal recreation areas may have designated swim areas with well-designed beaches, safety signage, identified depths, buoy lines, rescue equipment, and amenities such as life jacket loaner kiosks, changing areas, showers, and restrooms. Some have lifeguards. At guarded ocean beaches, areas near lifeguards are considered designated areas. Sensible swimmers take advantage of the extra layers of protection by choosing to visit designated swim areas protected by lifeguards.
- **Life Jackets versus Floats** – U.S. Coast Guard approved, properly fitted life jackets add an extra layer of protection. Life jackets provide a critical safeguard for weak and non-swimmers exposed to deep water in any environment, including pools, designated swim areas, and open water. Life jackets are also recommended for swimmers of all abilities in situations such as moving water, or outside designated swim areas in rivers, lakes, and oceans. Floats, such as tubes, air mattresses or 'floaties' are toys and should never be considered substitutes for a life jacket.
- **Boats** – Boats can provide platforms for swimming in open water and allow access to snorkeling sites, but present additional safety concerns. Make sure engines are off prior to anyone entering the water to avoid dangers from propellers and carbon monoxide. Leave a watcher on board who knows how to operate the boat in case the boat or swimmers drift away. Everyone on a small boat should always wear a life jacket when on board. Except in special circumstances, such as a trained, supervised, snorkeling group, everyone should continue to wear life jackets in the water.

Information and Resources

Click [HERE](#) to access more complete information on swim area safety, including facts, figures, and resources available for free download. Also, the Water Safety USA webpage on this topic includes an infographic.



<https://www.watersafetyusa.org/>