

International Open Water Drowning Prevention Guidelines

Open Water Drowning Prevention Guidelines and Rationale

Keep Yourself Safe

When in and around oceans, lakes and rivers, there are actions you can take to keep yourself safe and actions you can take to keep those in your care safe. While any one of the actions below may increase your level of safety, using all of the actions together will provide the most protection. The following guidelines are to help you reduce the risk of drowning for you and others in your care.

1. Learn swimming and water safety survival skills.

Learn how to swim safely. Learn the strokes and water safety skills. Being able to swim reduces the chance of a serious incident in or near the water, but swimming ability alone is no guarantee of safety. Most people learn to swim in a pool or calm water setting, but this does not fully prepare you for swimming in open waters like a lake, river or the ocean. Even good swimmers can encounter life-threatening problems, especially in open water. Swimming safely in any open water requires special caution. Different types of open water have changing risks such as currents and high waves. Never underestimate the risks or overestimate your ability to cope with the risks. Water safety is more than just having swimming skills. It is also having the confidence, knowledge and attitudes to be safe in and around water. Even if you are a good swimmer, choose a place with lifeguards when possible, so that in case of trouble, someone can rescue you. Finally, if in doubt, stay out of the water.

Learning to swim safely includes knowing how to:

- Float
- Tread water
- Enter and exit water safely
- Swim on your front and back, turn and roll over
- Swim or float with clothes on
- Be safe in, on or near water
- Be confident under water
- Wear a life jacket the right way
- Look for and avoid risks and hazards
- Assess your own skill level

2. Always swim with others.

Many drowning deaths involve people swimming alone. When you swim with someone else it is more likely that one of you can help the other and call or signal for help. In many cases, the person who is drowning is not able to call for help. At the very least, have someone watching from shore who can summon help if needed. Swimming with a buddy does not ensure safety since rescue is difficult. Your friend may not have good swimming or rescue skills and can be overcome during the rescue effort. Your best option is to swim where there is an on-duty lifeguard who knows how to safely rescue you.

3. Obey all safety signs and warning flags.

Signs and flags inform you about water dangers or show you where it is safer to swim. Signs can have important information about topics such as tide times and heights, underwater hazards, currents, waves and other possible dangers. Flags are often used to show lifeguarded areas, restricted or prohibited areas, and designated areas such as “surfing only” or “no swimming.” Flags often have special colours such as red for danger or prohibited use.

- Always look for signs or flags before you enter the water
- Find out what they say or mean and follow the warnings they provide
- Know what the colours of the flags mean and respect their meaning before entering the water

4. Never go in the water after drinking alcohol.

Alcohol is a key factor in many drowning deaths. It impairs coordination, judgment and swimming ability. Alcohol affects your heart and body temperature. It may cause you or others to take risks around water that would not otherwise be taken. Alcohol may also give a false impression of your ability to cope with the risks and make you overconfident about your ability to get out of trouble.

5. Know how and when to use a life jacket.

Life jackets, also called personal flotation devices or PFDs, save lives. They keep you afloat and some designs will help keep your airway above the water even if you are unconscious. They provide safety in the water when you are in trouble, get tired, panic or are injured. In addition to boating, life jackets can be used for swimming, wading and other water activities. Life jackets help you to be seen, making it easier to find and rescue you. Life jackets must fit snugly to work.

- Choose an approved life jacket that fits you properly
- Wear it the right way, and wear the right type of life jacket for the activity you are involved in
- Practice wearing a life jacket in the water

6. Swim in areas with lifeguards.

Lifeguards help protect you. No water is ever completely free from risk, but it's safest to swim where lifeguards are present. Lifeguards are trained to promote safe behavior around the water to prevent drowning. They watch for and help those in distress, providing rescue and medical assistance to those in need. Before entering the water at a beach with lifeguards, check with the lifeguards for safety advice about the location.

Know how and where to get help before someone is in trouble in the water. Every second counts when there is a problem and a rescue can be faster when you are prepared. Make note of these things when you arrive at your water site:

- How to get help in an emergency
- Where to find the lifeguard
- Nearest telephone
- If your mobile phone has reception
- Number to call in case of emergency
- Any rescue equipment nearby
- Your rescue skills or the skills of others with you

7. Know the water and weather conditions before getting in the water.

Cold water, weather, tides, surf, currents and other factors can have a major impact on open water safety. Wind, heavy rains or snowmelt can create dangerous water conditions. Local weather, as well as unseen weather that is far away, can produce rip currents at surf beaches and powerful, fast moving water in rivers and streams. Dams releasing water change water flow quickly. River currents are hard to see and they vary, even in the same location. These changes can also create underwater hazards.

- Check weather conditions before you leave home
- Check weather and water conditions when you arrive
- Stay alert for changes while you are at the site
- Stay out of the water if you hear thunder or see lightning

8. Always enter shallow and unknown water feet first.

Serious lifelong injuries occur every year due to diving headfirst and striking the bottom. Jumping from heights even into deep water may cause serious injury. Injuries can occur just by hitting the water. Bodysurfing can cause serious neck injuries if your head strikes the bottom. If you wish to dive, learn how to do it safely. Before diving in, check the water:

- Is the water deep enough?
- Are there any underwater hazards such as sandbanks, weeds and rocks?
- Could you hit an object, another person or the bottom?
- Enter shallow and unknown water by wading in the first time
- Avoid headfirst diving
- Always extend a hand in front of yourself when bodysurfing

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Keep Others Safe

When in and around oceans, lakes and rivers, there are actions you can take to keep yourself safe and actions you can take to keep those in your care safe. While any one of the actions below may increase your level of safety, using all of the actions together will provide the most protection. The following guidelines are to help you reduce the risk of drowning for you and others in your care.

1. Help and encourage others, especially children, to learn swimming and water safety survival skills.

Learning to swim is an important defense against drowning. Help and encourage others, especially children and teens, to learn swimming and water safety survival skills. Swimming lessons can start early since most children can learn to swim by age 4. Teaching even young children ages 1 to 4 may reduce their risk of drowning. However, being able to swim in a pool or calm water setting does not ensure safety in open waters like a lake, river or the ocean where water conditions are more challenging. Swimming safely in any body of water requires knowing the risks of the water in that setting and local conditions. Never underestimate the risk of open water swimming especially for weak swimmers, children, teens, and young adults.

Swimming ability alone is never enough. Good swimmers can drown. Learning to swim must include water safety education, knowing safe swimming techniques and acquiring the attitudes, knowledge, and judgment to practice safe behaviors. No matter how well you think your child can swim and how much you think they know about water safety, you must always supervise young children around water.

Being water safe also requires knowing your own limits as well as those of the people you are supervising. Never overestimate your or a child's ability to handle danger. If in doubt, stay out. Water safety is more than just having swimming skills. It also requires knowing what to do when in trouble in the water. It is having the confidence, knowledge, and attitudes so you can recognize and respond so that all can be safe in and around water.

Learn the strokes and water safety skills. Learning to swim safely includes knowing how to:

- Float
- Tread water
- Enter and exit safely
- Swim on front and back, turn and roll over
- Swim or float with clothes on
- Be safe in, on or near water
- Be confident under water
- Wear a life jacket the right way
- Look for risks and hazards
- Assess your own skill level
- Seek help from others when in danger

2. Swim in areas with lifeguards.

Lifeguards help protect you and those in your care. No water is ever completely free from risk, but it's safest to swim where lifeguards are present.

Lifeguards are trained to promote safe behavior around the water to prevent drowning. They watch for and help those in distress, providing rescue and medical assistance to those in need.

When caring for others, keep in mind that supervision is your prime responsibility, even when you are in an area with lifeguards. Before entering the water at a beach with lifeguards, check with the lifeguards for safety advice about the location. If you are in doubt about your role or the safety of those in your care, seek advice from the lifeguard.

Know how and where to get help before someone is in trouble in the water. Every second counts when there is a problem and a rescue can be faster when you are prepared. Make note of these things when you arrive at your water site:

- How to get help in an emergency
- Where to find the lifeguard
- Nearest telephone
- If your mobile phone has reception
- Number to call in case of emergency
- Any rescue equipment nearby
- Your rescue skills or the skills of others with you

Set water safety rules.

Children, teens, and you as a supervisor should know how to stay safe in and around water. This includes knowing how to recognize the water hazards, knowing your limits, knowing the limits of who you are watching, and knowing safe practices that reduce drowning risk. Do not underestimate risk and overestimate your ability or that of your child to handle danger. This is true for all age groups and all skill and knowledge levels.

- Set limits and explain the rules for safe behavior before you arrive at the water site
- Review limits and rules with teenagers if they are going out on their own
- Take time to review the limits and rules once you arrive
- Advise your group about how far they are allowed to swim from shore, known hazards, and areas they must avoid before approaching or entering the water
- Enforce the rules as needed and be consistent

4. Always provide close and constant attention to children you are supervising in or near water.

Most childhood drowning occurs when there is a lapse in supervision. Good supervision starts with good planning before you arrive at a water site. Once at the site, it requires that you be dedicated to the job, capable and able to respond. Many young children drown when they are playing near the water and then fall in. Keep in mind that lifeguards do not take the place of your supervision.

- Select a place to play or swim where there are lifeguards
- Ask the lifeguard about the safest place for swimming
- Assign adults to watch children if there is a group of people around water
- Have someone else supervise if you are under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- If you are taking care of more than one person, seek help from other responsible adults
- Do not allow those you supervise to enter the water until you are sure it is safe and you are ready
- Be clear about where people may and may not play or swim
- Provide close and constant supervision
- Always stay close enough to be able to rescue those you are supervising
- Stay within arm's reach if the person being supervised is a non-swimmer or poor swimmer
- If you sense danger or risk, trust your instincts – if in doubt, keep your children out of the water
- Know how and where to get help if needed
- Know your rescue skills and the skills of others with you

Make sure your child's caretaker understands water safety.

- Ask questions before your child goes on a school or youth group activity to a water site
- Talk with the caretaker about the kind of supervision you expect
- Check that the adults are well qualified
- Check that there will be enough adults for the number and varied skill levels in the group
- If you are unsure, go along or keep your child home

5. Know how and when to use life jackets, especially with children and weak swimmers.

Life jackets, also called personal flotation devices or PFDs, save lives. They keep you afloat and some designs will help keep your airway above the water even if you are unconscious. They provide safety in the water when you are in trouble, get tired, panic or are injured. In addition to boating, life jackets can be used for swimming, wading and other water activities. Life jackets help you to be seen, making it easier to find and rescue you. Life jackets must fit snugly to work. When you wear a life jacket you are a role model for children and you are better able to help rescue a child. Children are more likely to wear life jackets if parents or caretakers are wearing them.

- Choose an approved life jacket that fits your child or teen properly
- For young children use a life jacket with a collar for head support and a strap between the legs
- Have your child practice wearing a life jacket in the water and during swim lessons
- Ensure the person in your care is wearing it the right way, and wearing the right type of life jacket for the activity you are doing
- Wear a life jacket yourself so that you are ready to rescue the people in your care if needed

6. Learn first aid and CPR.

In case of drowning, be prepared to help without delay. Drowning causes a person to stop breathing. Early CPR (also called cardiopulmonary resuscitation) greatly increases the chances of survival from drowning. CPR skills require training that is available from a variety of groups. If you go to an area with water and particularly if you will be supervising others, learn first aid and CPR.

7. Learn safe ways of rescuing others without putting yourself in danger.

Learn safe rescue skills to avoid placing yourself in danger. Avoid entering the water to rescue someone. Each year, rescuers die in an effort to save others. Do not attempt to swim out and save someone unless you are trained to do so.

Recommended actions in order of personal safety are:

- Talk – tell the victim what to do and shout for help
- Reach – hold out a stick, pole or oar
- Throw – toss a rescue float or things that float such as a life jacket or an empty plastic jug
- Row – use any available craft if you have the skill to do so
- Go and tow – as a last resort, go into the water if you can do so without risking your own life. If possible, use a non-contact towing technique with any available equipment to bring the person to shore

8. Obey all safety signs and warning flags.

Signs and flags inform you about water dangers or show you where it is safer to swim. Signs can have important information about topics such as tide times and heights, underwater hazards, currents, waves and other water hazards. Flags are often used to show lifeguarded areas, restricted or prohibited use, and designated areas such as “surfing only” or “no swimming.” Flags often have special colours such as red for danger or prohibited use.

- Always look for signs or flags before you enter the water
- Find out what they say or mean and follow the warnings they provide
- Know what the colours of the flags mean and respect their meaning before entering the water

To learn more: www.seattlechildrens.org/dp

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