

Open Water and Beach Safety Guidelines



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

Frequently asked questions – Beach Safety

Q1. Every year thousands of people get into real, life-threatening difficulty on our beaches. How do you know where the best place to swim is?

You don't have to. It is the job of qualified Surf Lifeguards to determine the safest place to swim at a patrolled beach. They then indicate this spot by putting up two red and yellow flags. All you need to do is go to a lifeguard-patrolled beach, find the flags and, if you are going into the water make sure you stay between the flags. It pays to frequently look back to shore and check that you are still between the flags as you may drift away.

Q2. Is it ok to let children go swimming at the beach unaccompanied?

Whenever you are at a beach, river or swimming pool, make sure that you are actively watching your children in the water – never let them out of your sight!

Q3. Why should you listen to what the lifeguard says?

Lifeguards know all about the beach and the sea. Listen to what they have to say so you can have fun and keep safe. Ask them for some good tips on the surf, where the rips are or if there are any particular dangers on the day.

Q4. Is it ok to swim at a beach or river alone?

Never swim or surf alone. If you get into trouble there will be someone else to help. There are many examples of unforeseen dangerous elements within surf. For example, you may hit your head on a rock when diving under a wave. In this instance even the best swimmer would be in great harm.

Q5. How do you know if it is ok to swim?

If you are concerned in any way about going into the water when the surf is big or around rocks, it is best to trust your instinct and stay out. If you are at an un-patrolled beach and you don't think the water is safe to go in, stay out.

Q6. Is your skin enough protection from the New Zealand sun?

A sunny day at the beach is great, however please remember to be cautious of the strong New Zealand sun. You are at particular risk at the beach because there is often no shade and sand & water surfaces can reflect UV radiation, increasing your UV exposure. Sunburn not only hurts but it is also a sign that your skin has been damaged. The more times you get burnt the greater your chance of developing skin cancer.

There are many ways in which you can decrease the risk of sun damage.

Wear sunglasses, a hat, and make sure you apply sunscreen. The four important things to look for in a sunscreen are that:

1. It is at least 30+ SPF
2. It has not passed the expiry date
3. It is water resistant
4. It is Broad Spectrum

Take some shade with you to the beach, like an umbrella, and don't forget lots of water. Cover up with loose, but closely, woven clothing. Wear a rash shirt in the water. A tee shirt won't protect you from the sun in the water and it can make it difficult to swim in.

Q7. What should you do if you get into trouble when in the water?

1. Don't panic – This is one reason people drown
2. Relax – Conserve energy
3. Try and stand up – Many people who get into trouble in the surf can actually still touch the bottom but they haven't tried to stand up
4. Float on your back – Conserve energy, lie on your back while you wait for help
5. Raise your hand above your head to signal for help – Don't raise both arms as it is too hard to float

When a lifeguard approaches you they will stop at a safe distance and talk to you before they try and help you. This is for their safety.

Q8. How do you recognise a rip?

Rips are usually around rocks and where inland streams meet the sea. They also frequently occur across the beach and scour out a deep channel. The deeper sea floor makes the water in the rip a different colour to the surrounding water making it easier to spot. Waves break where the water level gets shallower. As the sea floor is deeper where a rip is there will not be breaking waves.

So make sure you look out for calm patches in the surf and discoloured water – this is a dangerous place to swim.

The safest place is where the waves are breaking evenly between the red and yellow flags.

Visit www.surflifesaving.org.nz for further beach safety information and location of patrolled beaches in your region.