Swimming & 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, but many people forget about water safety. Most water-related accidents can be avoided by knowing how to stay safe and following a few simple guidelines.

Buddy up! 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. 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. 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.

Be careful about diving. Diving injuries can cause permanent spinal cord damage, paralysis, and in some cases even death. Protect yourself by only diving in areas that are known to be safe, such as the deep end of a supervised pool. Pay attention to areas posted with "No Diving" or "No Swimming" signs. A "No Diving" sign 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 may be hard to see.

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. Even a very good swimmer who tries to swim against a strong current will get worn out.

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.

Drink plenty of fluids. It's easy to get dehydrated in the sun. Keep up with fluids, particularly water, to prevent dehydration. Dizziness, feeling light-headed, or nausea can be signs of dehydration and overheating.

Alcohol and water never mix. Alcohol is involved in numerous water-related injuries and deaths. Alcohol can reduce body temperature and impair swimming ability. Perhaps more importantly, both alcohol and drugs impair good judgment, which may cause people to take risks they would not otherwise take.