

What to know about water safety before heading to the beach or pool this summer

June 30 2024, by Freida Frisaro



Swimmers try to stay cool in near 100 degree temperatures at Red Oaks Waterpark in Madison Heights, Mich., June 28, 2012. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says drowning is the leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 4. It's also the second leading cause of unintentional death for those ages 5 to 14. Credit: AP Photo/Paul Sancya, File

With school out for the summer and temperatures rising across the country, many families will visit the beach, lake or local swimming pool. Now is the time to review safety tips to keep children safe around water.

[Drowning is the leading cause of death](#)

[for children ages 1 to 4 and the second leading cause of unintentional death for children in the 5 to 14 age group, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.](#)

[In the United States, 973 children under the age of 19 drowned in 2021, and another 6,500 were treated in emergency rooms following near drowning incidents, according to Gary Karton of Safe Kids Worldwide, a nonprofit organization working to prevent childhood injury.](#)

[In fact, more drownings occur in the summer, and specifically in July, than any other time of the year, according to the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh.](#)

[Palm Beach County Ocean Rescue lifeguard Daniel Barnickel said there always should be an adult monitoring the water.](#)

["As a whole, never swim alone," he said.](#)

[Taking the time to go over safety procedures and rules before heading to the pool or beach can benefit children and their parents.](#)

[If you have a backyard pool](#)

[The most important safety feature of a backyard swimming pool is a barrier, such as a safety fence, to prevent unsupervised access to the water.](#)

[Many children who drowned at home did so during times they were not expected to be in the water, according to the](#)

[American Red Cross](#). In some cases, children were out of sight for less than five minutes and in the care of one or both parents when they slipped into the pool and drowned, the agency said.

That said, it is vital to make sure children learn to swim. There are many programs that teach children to swim, including Red Cross swimming courses across the U.S.

If a child goes missing, remember that seconds count. Check the water first, safety experts advise. It's also important to have appropriate equipment available at home. This includes something to throw into the water for a child to grab onto, a [cell phone](#) to call for help, [life jackets](#) and a first aid kit.

Skills children should learn to prevent drowning

All children should learn to step or jump into water that's above their head and safely return to the surface and also be able to float or tread water, according to Safe Kids Worldwide.

They should also be able to quickly turn around in the water and find a safe place, combine breathing with moving forward in the water and get out of the water.

Create a safe environment

If several adults are at the pool, beach or lake with a group of children, choose a water watcher who can have eyes on the children at all times. It's a great idea to rotate the water watcher among the adults for brief

amounts of time, such as 15-minute intervals, experts at Safe Kids Worldwide recommend.

While at the pool or around water, it's advisable to avoid distractions. Put away phones, books and magazines, because drowning is often silent and can happen in less than five minutes.

When you're finished swimming, make sure to remove all floats and pool toys so [young children](#) won't be enticed to reach for them.

Teach children to stay away from pool drains or suction devices, which can entrap swimmers' hair or limbs.

Since 2014, all public pools and spas in the U.S. have been required to comply with the Virginia Graeme Baker Pool & Spa Safety Act, which was named after a 7-year-old girl who died after being caught by the strong suction of a hot tub drain in 2002. Her mother lobbied Congress to require drain covers and other pool safety features.

But even with those safety elements, experts say it's a good practice to check the drains and devices before children get into a pool.

More water safety tips

Always swim with a buddy, or in an area supervised by a lifeguard.

"Make sure that you don't overestimate your abilities," Barnickel said.

"Know your limits."

Have young or inexperienced children wear U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets. The size of the life jacket should be based on the child's height and weight. Never substitute arm floaties or inflatable swimming rings for life jackets.

The best practice is to keep children within an arm's reach of an adult at all times when in the water and teach them to always ask permission to go near the water.

Enforce [safety](#) rules, including no running or pushing on the pool deck and no dunking people in the water. It's also a good idea to keep them from chewing gum or eating while swimming or jumping in the water.

Experts also recommend making sure [children](#) know the depth of the water so they don't dive into the shallow end and get injured.

Swimming in open water

Open water, such as the ocean or a lake, is much different than a backyard swimming pool.

Children need to understand there can be limited visibility and uneven surfaces in the ocean and lakes. They also need to be taught about currents and undertow, which can pull them under water and away from the shore.

"Year after year in South Florida, rip currents claim more lives than every weather-related hazard combined," Barnickel said. "We've seen locals come here that have been going to the beach their whole life, and they've never been caught in a rip current, or they think that they have and they know what to do. And they'll get pulled out into a rip current. We'll go out and get them, and they say, 'I can't believe that happened.'"

When at a beach or lake, it's important to use designated swimming or recreational areas. Watch for signs posted about water hazards, as well as the times that lifeguards will be present.

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