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Refresh Your Memory About Summer Water Safety

(Featured June 28, 2004)

During the summer, fun family activities and water go hand in hand. Most of us have fond childhood memories of picnics at the beach, water skiing, rope swings over the river, and water clogged ears from hours in the pool. And yet, every summer we see tragic news stories about water-related deaths and injuries that, for the most part, could have been prevented. The statistics are shocking:

- More than 900 children ages 14 and under drown each year, and more than 60 percent of those are under the age of 4. More than half of the drownings in pools occur at the child's own home, with another one-third of the drownings occurring at the homes of friends, neighbors, or relatives. Another 2,600 children are treated in hospital emergency rooms for nearly drowning.
- In 1998, 4,406 people drowned in the United States—an average of 12 people per day. Drowning is the second leading cause of accidental deaths for persons 15 to 44 years of age.
- Alcohol use is involved in about 25 to 50 percent of adolescent and adult deaths associated with water recreation. It is a major contributing factor in up to 50 percent of drownings among adolescent boys.
- According to the U.S. Coast Guard, 734 people died in recreational boating incidents in 1999, and nearly three-quarters of those were due to drowning. Of those, nearly nine in 10 were not wearing personal flotation devices.
- Personal watercrafts (PWC) account for 19 percent of "registered boats," yet they are involved in 45 percent of injuries. Of all PWC accidents, 76 percent involved collisions—70 percent with other vessels, and 6 percent with fixed objects. PWC are six times more likely to be involved in an injury accident than a motorboat.
- Every year, diving accidents result in more than 8,000 people suffering paralyzing spinal cord injuries and another 5,000 dying before they reach the hospital.
- From cuts and scrapes, to broken bones, to heartbreak beyond comprehension, it is hard to imagine anything more tragic than a death or injury to a family member during what should be quality time together. The following tips for you and your family can help maintain safety during all summer water-related events and contribute to a happy and safe summer.

Beaches

- Protect your skin by limiting the amount of direct sunlight you receive between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Wear a sunscreen with a sun protection factor of at least 15.
- Drink water frequently and drink plenty of it, even if you do not feel thirsty. Sports drinks such as Gatorade are fine, but avoid drinks with caffeine. Avoid alcohol. It not only increases dehydration, it also is a major contributing factor to injuries.

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- Watch for signs of heat stroke. It can be deadly. Warning signs include hot, red, dry skin, and a change in consciousness, a rapid and weak pulse, and rapid and shallow breathing. This is a life-threatening event. If someone shows signs of a heat stroke, call 911 immediately! Until help arrives, move the person into the shade or an air-conditioned area, if possible. Quickly cool the person by wrapping wet sheets around the person's body and then fanning them. If you have ice packs or cold packs, place them on each of the victim's wrists and ankles, as well as in the armpits and on the neck. This will help cool the large blood vessels. While waiting for emergency personnel, watch for signals of breathing problems, make sure the airway is kept clear, and keep the person lying down.
- Wear UV listed sunglasses (rated to absorb at least 90 percent of UV sunlight) to protect against UV ray damage.
- Always wear some sort of shoes—to protect against your feet getting burned by sun-heated sand or cut by broken glass and pieces of metal.

Boating

- Be familiar with your boat and learn the “rules of the road” by taking a safe boating course from a reputable source such as the Red Cross, the U.S. Power Squadron, the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, US Sailing, etc.
- Ensure that your boat has all required safety equipment, and check it each time you go out.
- Learn to swim. Knowing how to swim can save your life.
- Do not overload your boat. Consider the size of your boat, the number of passengers and the amount of extra equipment that will be on board.
- If you are using a powerboat, check your electrical system and fuel system—always check for gas fumes.
- Follow manufacturers suggested procedures before starting the engine.
- Wear your life jacket and make sure your passengers do as well —DO NOT simply carry them with you on the boat. Make sure that life jackets are Coast Guard approved and are the proper sizes for the people wearing them.
- Do not rely on substitutes. The use of flotation devices and inflatable toys cannot replace approved life jackets and appropriate parental supervision. Devices such as inflatable toys could suddenly shift position, lose air, or slip out from underneath a person, leaving a child in a potentially life-threatening situation.
- Do not use alcohol while boating. It severely impairs your judgment, balance, and coordination—the same reasons it is dangerous to operate an automobile while under the influence of alcohol. People should not operate a boat while drinking alcohol.
- When towing skiers, always turn the boat motor completely off when you approach a fallen skier. Make sure that you have an observer for the skier so that the boat operator can focus on driving the boat and looking out for potential hazards.
- Check the weather forecast and do not operate a boat when lightning is evident. Consider the time it will take to get to shore and to get the boat on the trailer—particularly since everyone else on the lake will be doing the same.
- File a “float plan” with a member of your family or with a friend. It lets them know where you will be and when you will return.
- Make sure you take frequent breaks. Research shows that four hours of boating, exposure to noise, vibration, sun, glare, and wind produces enough fatigue to cause a normal person to act as if they are legally intoxicated.
- Keep hydrated. As with beach safety, drink plenty of water or sports drinks such as Gatorade, and avoid caffeine.

- Operate personal watercraft (PWC)—jet skis and similar pieces of equipment—with courtesy and common sense:
 - Follow the established traffic pattern of the waterway.
 - Obey no-wake and speed zones.
 - Use extreme caution around swimmers and surfers.
 - Run your PWC at a slow speed until the craft is well away from the shore, swimming areas, and docks.
 - Avoid jumping wakes and passing close to other boats and PWCs. This behavior is dangerous and often illegal.
 - Make sure that you and any passengers wear Coast Guard-approved life jackets.
 - Ride with a buddy. PWCs should always travel in groups of two or three since you never know when an emergency might occur.

The Ocean

- Learn to swim. Knowing how to swim can save your life.
- Stay within the designated swimming area—ideally within eyesight of a lifeguard.
- Never swim alone. NEVER!
- Check the surf conditions before you enter the water. Check to see if a warning flag is up, or check with a lifeguard for water conditions, beach conditions, or any potential hazards.
- Stay away from piers, pilings, and diving platforms when in the water.
- Keep a lookout for aquatic life. Avoid patches of plants, and leave animals alone.
- Make sure you always have enough energy to swim back to shore.
- Do not try to swim against a current (rip current) if you get caught in one. Instead, swim gradually out of the current by swimming across it (parallel to shore) until you are out of the current and able to swim toward the shore.

Lakes and Rivers

- Again, learn to swim. Knowing how to swim can save your life.
- Select a supervised area, preferably with a trained lifeguard. Never swim alone.
- For your and your family's health and safety, select an area that is clean and well maintained, preferably with clean bathhouses, clean restrooms, and a litter-free environment. Select an area that has good water quality and safe natural conditions, with no strong tides, no big waves, and no known currents. Murky water, hidden underwater objects, unexpected drop-offs, and aquatic plant life are hazards.
- Make sure the water is deep enough before diving, and be aware that the water level in lakes and rivers fluctuates significantly. A feet-first entry is much safer than diving.
- Be sure rafts and docks are in good condition, and never swim under a raft or dock. Always look before jumping off a dock or raft to be sure no one is in the way.
- Avoid drainage ditches and arroyos, since sources for water run-off are not good places for swimming or playing in the water. After heavy rains, they can quickly change into raging rivers with deadly debris—and even the strongest swimmers are no match for the power of this type of moving water.

Other activities

- When sail-boarding and windsurfing, know the limits of your ability (take windsurfing lessons from a qualified instructor), always wear a Coast Guard-approved life jacket, wear a wet suit in cold water to prevent hypothermia, make sure that you are an excellent swimmer, and be constantly aware of local weather conditions.

- When skin or scuba diving, know the limits of your ability (take lessons from a qualified diver, get a medical examination, and take a swim test before training), do not dive in rough or dangerous waters, never dive by yourself, and be constantly aware of local weather conditions.
- When snorkeling, practice first in shallow water to ensure you are completely familiar with the equipment and know how it functions—including how to clear water from the snorkel and how to put your mask back on when you tread water. Never snorkel alone, and be careful not to swim or be carried by a current too far from shore or the boat.
- When skiing, make sure that you know how to swim well, always wear a Coast Guard-approved life jacket, make sure the boat and ski equipment are in good shape, make sure that the boat motor is completely off before you approach a fallen skier, watch the water ahead of you at all times when you are driving and have an extra person aboard to watch and assist the skier, run parallel to shore and come in slowly when landing (the skier sits down if coming in too fast and uses proper hand signals to signal the boat operator) and do not ski at night or in restricted areas.
- When tubing or rafting, ensure that you know how to swim well, always wear a Coast Guard-approved life jacket, do not overload the raft, do not go rafting after a heavy rain, be constantly aware of local weather conditions, and when rafting with a tour company, make sure the guides are qualified (check with the local chamber of commerce for listings of accredited tour guides and companies).
- When surfing, ensure that you know how to swim well, take lessons from an experienced individual, wear a wet suit when in cold water, be constantly aware of local weather conditions, and never surf alone.

Home Pools

- Learn to swim and take a lifesaving course. Teach your children to swim as well by enrolling them in a water safety course. It is a gift of love that will last a lifetime.
- Learn CPR and insist that babysitters, grandparents, and others who care for your children know CPR.
- Never leave a child unobserved around water, and make sure that adult supervision is present. Remember, it takes only a few seconds for a small child to wander away, and children have a natural curiosity and attraction to water.
- Clearly post CPR instructions and 911 or your local emergency number in the pool area.
- Install a phone by the pool or keep a cordless phone nearby so that you can immediately call 911 in an emergency.
- Enclose the pool completely with a self-locking, self-closing fence with vertical bars providing for spaces no more than four inches wide. If your house is part of the barrier, the doors leading from the house to the pool should remain locked and be protected with an alarm that produces a loud sound when the door is unexpectedly opened.
- Never leave furniture near the fence that would enable a child to climb over the fence to access the pool.
- Always keep basic lifesaving equipment such as a pole, rope, and personal flotation devices by the pool and know how to use them.
- Keep toys away from the pool when not in use. Toys can attract young children into the pool area.
- Pool covers should always be completely removed prior to pool use.
- If a child is missing, check the pool first. Go to the edge of the pool and scan the entire pool, bottom, and surface, as well as the surrounding pool area.

- As with boating safety, do not use flotation devices and inflatable toys as a substitute for attentive parental supervision.

Bottom Line: With the proper planning and commitment to safety, you and your family can continue to enjoy quality time together and build memories for a lifetime. If you apply common sense and follow these basic guidelines, you can be assured that your water-related activities will create memories that you will want to remember.

For more information:

- Your local Red Cross offers many safety-training courses including swimming, CPR, and pool safety. You can find the nearest office by going to <http://www.redcross.org/where/where.html>.
- The U.S. Army Corp of Engineers has an online catalog of resources for their National Water Safety Program that you can order from <http://w3.nww.usace.army.mil/apps/watersafetyorders>.
- The U.S. Coast Guard has a comprehensive site for boating safety—including training resources, checklists, and other information. Go to <http://www.uscgboating.org>.

References:

- American Red Cross at <http://www.redcross.org>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at <http://www.cdc.gov>
- Lancaster General Hospital at <http://www.lha.org>
- U.S. Army Corp of Engineers at <http://watersafety.usace.army.mil>
- U.S. Coast Guard at <http://www.uscg.mil/USCG.shtm>

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