

Be Red Cross Ready

Swimming Safely in Lakes, Rivers and Streams

Swimming in lakes, rivers and streams can be safe at designated swimming areas that are protected by lifeguards. Swimming in a natural body of water is different from swimming in a pool. More skills and energy are required for natural water environments because of cold water and air temperatures, currents, waves and other conditions—and these conditions can change due to weather.

Life Jackets Are Not Just for Boating.

Many people involved in aquatic emergencies never intended to swim in the first place. Whenever you are around water, take steps to prepare for the unexpected, such as wearing a U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket, also known as a personal flotation device (PFD). Select and use the right life jacket by:

- Checking the life jacket label for proper usage and sizing and to be sure that it is U.S. Coast Guard approved.
- Making sure each life jacket fits its intended user.
- Checking buckles and straps for proper function. Discard any life jacket with torn fabric or straps that have pulled loose.
- Making sure everyone tests swimming in a life jacket in a swimming pool.

How Do I Prepare?



Be Aware of Water and Weather Conditions.

Whenever you are near a natural water environment, look out for:

- ☐ Unexpected changes in air or water temperature.
- ☐ Fast-moving currents, waves and rapids, even in shallow water.
- ☐ Hazards, such as dams, underwater obstacles, or rocks or debris moving on the surface or along the bottom of the water.
- ☐ Aquatic life, such as vegetation that could entangle feet or animals that live in, on or around the water.
- ☐ Sudden drop-offs that change water depth.
- ☐ Other people's activities in the same waters, such as boating.

Make Smart Choices.

Planning ahead and staying informed can help keep everyone in your group safe. Remember to:

- ☐ Be aware of the potential hazards of the area you are visiting and take appropriate precautions.
- ☐ Check water and weather conditions before your trip and frequently during your stay.
 - Watch for signs of severe weather and leave the water at the first indication of thunder and lightning. In the event of an electrical storm, stay inside an enclosed area for at least 30 minutes after the last thunder clap. If outside, avoid open areas, tall, isolated trees or metal objects.*
- ☐ Know the abilities of those going with you, including swimming abilities and level of supervision required. Be sure to provide appropriate supervision.

What Do I Do at the Waterfront?



Practice Water Safety.

- ☐ Ensure that everyone in your family learns to swim well by enrolling them in age-appropriate learn-to-swim courses.
- ☐ Swim only in areas that are designated for swimming with buoys and ropes and are supervised by lifeguards.
- ☐ Keep children under constant active supervision and remain free from distractions. Ensure that inexperienced swimmers stay within arm's reach.
- ☐ Have weak swimmers wear U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets whenever they are in, on or around water. Do not rely upon water wings or inflatable toys; they can enable swimmers to go beyond their ability or suddenly deflate, which could lead to a drowning situation.

Set and Enforce Rules.

- ☐ Always swim with a buddy.
- ☐ Always enter unknown or shallow water cautiously, feet first.
- ☐ Dive only in water clearly marked as safe for diving. Diving areas should be at least 9 feet deep with no underwater obstacles.
- ☐ Do not enter the water from a height, such as a tree, ledge or bridge.
- ☐ Be careful when standing to prevent being knocked over by currents or waves.
- ☐ Do not use alcohol and/or drugs before or while swimming, diving or supervising swimmers.

Prevent Recreational Water Illnesses.

Natural water can become contaminated from sewage, animal waste and water runoff following rainfall. Swimming or playing in unsafe water may result in illnesses. It is important to:

- ☐ Avoid swallowing the water.
- ☐ Contact your state or local health department for results of water testing in your area.
- ☐ Avoid swimming after rainfalls or in areas identified as unsafe by health departments.

How Do I Respond?



Know How to Respond in an Emergency.

- ☐ If a child is missing, always check the water first! Seconds count in preventing death or disability from drowning.
- ☐ If present, always alert the lifeguard in the event of an emergency.
- ☐ Know how and when to call 9-1-1 or the local emergency number.
- ☐ Learn how to respond to aquatic and other emergencies by taking Red Cross first aid, CPR and water safety courses.
- ☐ Have appropriate equipment, such as reaching or throwing equipment, a cell phone, life jackets and a first aid kit.

If Someone Is in Trouble in the Water:

- ☐ Reach out to the person using any available object that will extend your reach, such as a pole, an oar, a tree branch, a belt or a towel. Brace yourself to keep from losing your balance.
- ☐ Throw anything that will provide the victim support, such as a foam cooler or inner tube. A floating object with a line attached is best so you can pull the person to safety.
- ☐ If the water is shallow and calm, put on a life jacket, wade into the water and reach toward the person with a pole, branch, life jacket or other object.
 - Do not enter the water if a current or waves make wading dangerous.
- ☐ Keep yourself safe. In most cases, only trained professionals should enter the water to perform a rescue.

Caution: No One Is "Drownproof."

Participation in any swim lesson program cannot "drownproof" your child, despite what some may claim. No child is ever "drownproof" or water safe.

- ☐ Water safety and learn-to-swim courses should be age-appropriate.
- ☐ Learning to swim well takes time. Do not expect that children will learn to swim in one set of lessons or even in one season.

*Source: National Weather Service