

Keeping Safe in the Water



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Summer is here, and with it comes an increase in swimming and other aquatic activities. To me, there is nothing more relaxing than floating in the ocean or a pool. (Personally, I've never been a lake girl.)

I cannot remember not knowing how to swim. My mother, who in her youth was a swimming instructor, taught all my siblings and me. Mom instructed us not only on how to swim but also on understanding that every "body" of water has the potential to be dangerous.

Moreover, we all knew "the rules" to follow when near the water. The key ones: Pay attention in the water; wait an hour after eating before going in; and never swim alone. If we were in a boat, regardless of our swimming ability, we were required to wear a life jacket. Failure to adhere to even one of these would result in being "dry docked"—in other words, having to sit on the beach or poolside and not being allowed to go into the water. This was something none of us ever wanted.

Because of my childhood experience, swimming and water safety are second nature to me, along with playing a role in water safety activities through high school and college. I was a lifeguard at local pools and taught swimming and lifesaving at a YMCA. Just as I learned, I taught others to be ever vigilant around the water. I was, and taught others to be, cautious about never swimming alone—always have a buddy—and when in the ocean, to heed the warning signs of dangerous waves or riptides.

I taught people of all ages to swim. The youngest was an

8-month-old girl and the oldest, a 62-year-old man. While I never expected either of them to become a competitive swimmer, what I wanted was for them to be able to keep safe around the water. That is the goal of teaching someone to swim: to give that person the tools to save himself or herself when in danger in the water. Sadly, every season (not just summer), people drown.

According to the CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, the leading factors that affect the risk for drowning—the ones over which we have control—are

Lack of Swimming Ability:

Many people—adults and children alike—report that they cannot swim. Research indicates that formal swimming lessons can reduce the risk for drowning among children ages 1 to 4.

Lack of Barriers: Barriers such as fencing can prevent young children from gaining access to a pool without caregivers' awareness. (Some municipalities have zoning ordinances for private pool owners, requiring barriers for safety.)

Lack of Supervision: Drowning can happen quickly and quietly anywhere there is water (eg, bathtub, swimming pool, bucket) and even in the presence of lifeguards.

Location: People of different ages drown in different locations. For example, home swimming pools are the site of most drownings among children ages 1 to 4. Drownings in natural settings (eg, lakes, rivers, oceans) increase with age; more than half of fatal and nonfatal drownings among those ages 15 and older occur in these settings.

Failure to Wear Life Jack-

ets: The US Coast Guard (USCG) received reports of 4,604 boating incidents in 2010; a total of 3,153 boaters were injured, and 672 died. Most boating deaths were by drowning, with 88% of victims not wearing life jackets at the time of the incident.

Alcohol Use: Among adolescents and adults, alcohol use is involved in up to 70% of deaths associated with water recreation, almost a quarter of emergency department visits for drowning, and about one in five reported boating deaths.¹

Since 2010, I have read multiple news stories about people drowning unintentionally. The causes have ranged from being swept away in raging floodwaters; grounding, capsizing, or sinking a vessel; and water-skiing or similar mishaps.² In fact, each day about 10 people die from unintentional drowning; what is surprising is that only two of them are children younger than 14. This statistic tells me that we need

to include water safety warnings in our “anticipatory guidance” for all patients. We must raise awareness of the need to be cautious around water, even if the person knows how to swim.

The National Drowning Prevention Alliance, the USCG, the CDC, and the World Health Organization provide information about water safety and drowning prevention. The vital message is that no single device or solution can prevent drowning.

That said, we must remind our patients and families to be attentive while near, in, or on the water. Caution them to be alert to potential dangers in all environments—even the most innocent-looking or most familiar body of water can be a threat. All adults and children should wear life jackets or personal flotation devices (PFD) approved by the USCG when boating (even if the boat is only a canoe)!

Recent events among my circle of friends and family have made me

revisit one of the rules of my childhood and consider extending it. In discussions with colleagues, I have suggested that we recommend everyone older than 40 seriously consider wearing some type of PFD when near or in the water, even if they are not in a boat. Some rebuffed this idea as an unnecessary nuisance. But I consider it a minor inconvenience that could mean the difference between a fatal and non-fatal aquatic incident. I cannot help but wonder if it would have made a difference in some cases.

How strictly do you enforce “the rules” for yourself and your family? Share your feedback at NPeditor@frontlinemedcom.com. **CR**

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