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Ocean Swimming Safety

According to the US Lifesaving Association (USLA), drowning is the third leading cause of accidental death in the US and the second leading cause of accidental death for people ages 5 to 44 years. Drowning is the leading cause of injury death for persons under 15 years of age in California, Florida, and Hawaii.

When organizations lead groups to beaches and the ocean environment it is particularly important to have good aquatic safety procedures in place. The following recommendations will assist organizations in establishing good aquatic safety practices and help to ensure the safety of swimmers in ocean areas.

Locations

It is important to select locations that are appropriate for group swimming. Always take groups where Lifeguard supervision is available. Groups may depend on Lifeguards provided by the location, and/or in the best case, bring their own certified Lifeguards in addition to those provided. Lifeguards should be properly certified, equipped and familiar with the feature and conditions of the area. Stay at least 100 feet away from piers and jetties; permanent rip currents often exist along side these structures. Organizations should ensure that all entrance fees or permits are obtained before any activity.

Swimmer Management

All swimmers should be tested for their ability prior to any aquatic activity. This test should be conducted in a controlled environment and the results recorded. All swimmers should have their activity monitored based on the results of their test and a system of using caps or bands should be utilized to designate their ability. It is particularly important to utilize group management techniques such as a "Buddy" system when participating in the open water environment. All staff should have responsibility for supervision during open water swimming activities. This includes watching swimmers in the water in order to alert Lifeguards to problems and also the control of participants on the beach area. Non-swimmers must be restricted to shallow areas and wear US Coast Approved flotation devices.

Learn to Swim

Teaching swimming skills is one of the most effective activities to prevent aquatic incidents. Organizations can prepare for outdoor seasonal swimming by training staff and providing swim instruction to participants in the off season months. All staff and swimmers should be familiar with ocean swimming skills since they differ significantly from the typical skills needed for pools.

The USLA encourages these safety practices for open water swimming activities:

Swim near a Lifeguard - USLA statistics over a ten year period show that the chance of drowning at a beach without lifeguard protection is almost five times as great as drowning at a beach with lifeguards.

Learn to Swim - Learning to swim is the best defense against drowning. Teach children to swim at an early age. Children who are not taught when they are very young tend to avoid swim instruction as they age, probably due to embarrassment. Swimming instruction is a crucial step to protecting children from injury or death.

Never swim alone - Many drownings involve single swimmers. When you swim with a buddy, if one of you has a problem, the other may be able to help, including signaling for assistance from others. At least have someone onshore watching you.

Don't fight the current - USLA has found that some 80% of rescues at ocean beaches are caused by rip currents. These currents are formed by surf and gravity, because once surf pushes water up the slope of the beach, gravity pulls it back. This can create concentrated rivers of water moving offshore.

Don't float where you can't swim - Nonswimmers often use floatation devices, like inflatable rafts, to go offshore. If they fall off, they can quickly drown. No one should use a floatation device unless they are able to swim. Use of a leash is not enough because a non-swimmer may panic and be unable to swim back to the floatation device, even with a leash. The only exception is a person wearing a US Coast Guard approved life jacket.

Don't dive headfirst, protect your neck - Serious, lifelong injuries, including paraplegia, occur every year due to diving headfirst into unknown water and striking the bottom. Bodysurfing can result in a serious neck injury when the swimmer's neck strikes the bottom. Check for depth and obstructions before diving, then go in feet first the first time; and use caution while bodysurfing, always extending a hand ahead of you.

Rip Current Safety

Rip currents are formed by the interaction of surf and gravity. Some people mistakenly call this an undertow because it seems as though a current under their feet is pulling them. If you are caught in a rip current, remain calm and don't fight the current by trying to swim directly to shore. Instead, swim parallel to shore until you feel the current relax, and then swim to shore. Most rip currents are narrow and a short swim parallel to shore will bring you to safety. If you are unable to swim out of the rip current, float or calmly tread water and when out of the current, swim toward shore. If you are still unable to reach shore, draw attention to yourself by waving your arm and yelling for help. If you see someone else in trouble get help from a lifeguard. Many people drown while trying to save someone else from a rip current.

Beach Safety Flags

The USLA has developed a system of alerts designated by posted flags that has been adopted by many ocean locations throughout the US. Groups should be familiar with these flags when participating in ocean and beach location aquatic activities.

Types of beach safety flags:

Yellow – Medium hazard. Moderate surf and/or currents are present. Weak swimmers are discouraged from entering the water.

Red – High hazard. Rough conditions such as strong surf and/or currents are present. All swimmers are discouraged from entering the water.

Double red – Water is closed to public use.

Purple – Marine pests, such as jellyfish, stingrays, sea snakes or other marine life which can cause minor injuries are present in the water.

Red/yellow (halved red over yellow) – The area is protected by lifeguards. These flags may be used in pairs spaced apart to indicate a designated area or zone along a beach or waterfront that is most closely supervised or patrolled by qualified lifeguards.

More information on aquatic safety is available form Safe-Wise Consulting's online resource library.

Information from the US Lifesaving Association was used in the preparation of this document.