

Dr. Lipoff: Why you need to learn to swim and understand rip currents

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I realize this is a difficult topic to discuss because locally we have had several tragic deaths due to rip currents. However if we don't learn something from this we will continue to experience similar tragedies.

The first part of this article will be about the importance of learning to swim and the second; about rip currents.

Each year many children ages 1 – 14 years old will drown. More than 30% of children that die unexpectedly between the ages of 1-4 years old are the result of drowning. It is the number two cause of accidental death of our kids. Each year since 1999, over 800 kids under the age of 14 have died due to drowning.

Motor vehicle accidents remains number one, so use your directional, slow down and stop texting.

I was surprised to learn that drowning is the 5th leading cause of death of people of all ages. However, one out of every five who die is a child under the age of 14 years old. So if YOU, know how to swim, you may have a chance to save a child if you are in the area.

The top four locations for these types of tragedies are: 1) Natural waters, 2) Boating related, 3) swimming pools and 4) your bath tub.

Males are far more likely to drown than women and represent 88% of all accidents. Regarding the incidents based on race; Blacks, Whites and Hispanics, drowning rates all increase during their late teens.

I just had this talk with my son warning him about hanging with his friends near water, possibly drinking, showing off or doing something else that would be deemed irresponsible or just plain dumb. I threatened him he would attend all parties with a floatation device to either be thrown in for himself or for someone else.

The Coast Guard reported in 2007, 75% of boating related deaths were due to drowning and 84% were not wearing a life jacket. I know it may not look cool or will mess up your tan line but this seems a pretty easy solution versus ending up with a pale, white skin color.

Here are some precautions to follow:

- Take swim lessons. There are classes available throughout St. Mary's County.
- Wear a life jacket when needed.
- Don't drink alcohol and swim; Jet Ski, water ski, go tubing or boating.
- Inform others where you are going and what time you should be returning. Update them if your plans change.
- Jump in feet first when entering unknown waters. Many people dive into a creek only to hit a rock.
- Don't dive into the shallow end of the pool. I did it when I was a kid because "I knew what I was doing" and remember bumping my head on one occasion. I was fortunate to not snap my neck, which is a common cause of paralysis.
- • Bring safety gear on your boat and even carry it on your life jacket. Bring flares, powdered-dye, flashlights, horns, inflatable dive sausage or glow sticks on life vest depending on your adventure, a mirror to reflect the sun or moon for added visibility, etc. can all help aid your rescue regardless of time of day.
- Keep an eye on your children. It takes less than a minute for a child to drown and they can do so in an inch of water, without making a sound to alert you.
- Don't let younger children bathe unattended.
- Lock gates and doors around your pool.
- Purchase a warning system for your pool. We use one that mounts into the pool and then if anything over 10 pounds breaks the water it causes water to rise in a tube and sounds a loud alarm. The other unit is a bracelet the kids wear and if it gets wet an alarm inside the house blasts. Can never be too safe.
- Talk to your kids about pool safety and rules several times because they don't listen. Maybe even speak with the teens hanging out at the local watering hole.
- Watch other swimmers for signs of danger in the water or in case they need help.

- Learn CPR.
- Pay attention to the weather and water forecast.
- Avoid waters that are known to have strong currents. Under water currents can pull a swimmer out from shore at a rate of 8 feet per second. Even Michael Phelps can't beat Mother Nature.

Rip currents are sudden but you might be able to recognize their presence. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), these could help you locate a rip current:

- A choppy channel of water that has a churning motion.
- A line of sea foam, seaweed or debris that is moving steadily out to sea.
- A disrupted pattern of incoming waves.

Here is a website to help forecast possible rip currents in your area. <http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov/forecasts.html>
The NOAA also recommends these tips if you are ever caught in a current:

- Keep calm. Don't fight the rip current.
- To get out of the rip current, swim sideways, parallel to the beach. This will get you out of the rip current so you can swim back in with the waves helping you along.
- When out of the rip current, swim at an angle away from the rip current and toward shore.
- If you can't escape this way, try to float or calmly tread water. Rip current strength eventually weakens offshore. When it does, swim away from the rip current toward shore.
- If at any time you are unable to reach the shore, draw attention to yourself: face the shore, wave your arms, and yell for help.

Please be safe out there and keep an eye on your children, of all ages and be smarter about water activities.

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He received his Bachelor of Science degree from Syracuse University in 1990, a Doctorate of Chiropractic (D.C.) from New York Chiropractic College (NYCC) in 1994 and he became a Certified Fitness Trainer (CFT) in 2005.

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