



Wednesday, October 10, 2007

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## CDC Urges Water Safety This Summer

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As employees and their families hit the water this 4<sup>th</sup> of July holiday week, it's important to exercise caution, urges NCIPC. In 2004, the United States had 3,308 unintentional fatal drownings, averaging nine people per day. Drownings increase by 89 percent over the summer months.

"This caution should resonate with families with young children since drowning is the second leading cause of death in children ages one to 4, second only to motor-vehicle deaths," says Christine Branche, PhD, director, Division of Unintentional Injury Prevention (DUIP), NCIPC.



NCIPC's Julie Gilchrist (left) and Christine Branche note that young children are vulnerable to drowning in swimming pools, and urge barriers to pools and close supervision. *Photo by Leesia Teh*

### Drowning Defined



Safe Kids Worldwide's coalition in Homer, Alaska, began the 'Kids Don't Float' PFD Loaner Program in 1996. It has since expanded to 400 sites.

"We've conducted EPI-Aids about drowning of small children in swimming pools and other kinds of drowning-related injuries. Children are particularly vulnerable in swimming pools, but children can die in liquid as little as an inch," says Branche. In 2006, Branche, along with world renowned experts, formally defined drowning as a process and a mechanism of injury, making it no longer appropriate to use the term, 'near drowning.' "Some drownings are fatal and some are non-fatal," she explains.

### Drowning Dangers in Your Own Backyard

Julie Gilchrist, MD, CDR, USPH, medical epidemiologist in DUIP, and lead author of the [MMWR, Nonfatal and Fatal Drownings in Recreational Water Settings – United States, 2001-2002](#), notes that drowning doesn't discriminate and parents shouldn't be lulled by the confidence that they are conscientious caregivers.

"Drowning hits every socio-economic group, every race. You can't think, 'Oh, I'm a well educated parent and I supervise my child so they aren't at risk.'" The biggest risks to young children are in backyard pools, but the risks can vary dramatically by a child's age or location.

"Once kids are past the first year of life, drowning in bathtubs is less common, whereas swimming pools pose the greatest risk to toddlers and preschool-age children. School age kids who have had swimming lessons, tend to drown less often; however, that's the age where lakes, rivers, ponds, streams and oceans become much more of a risk. The proportion of drownings in these locations increase as people age," she says.

### Barriers Buy Caregivers Time



The biggest mistake people make is going to beaches with no lifeguards present, says B. Christopher Brewster, president of the United States Lifesaving Association. *Photo by USLA*

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#### CDC Organization

Gilchrist points to two common scenarios – the first, children entering a pool at unexpected times when supervision may be less, such as right after a nap, the second, when a parent is distracted while near the pool.

“We encourage people who have backyard pools to put in a series of barriers, the most important being a four-sided isolation pool fence,” notes Gilchrist. “Additional barriers are out-of-reach locks, window locks and door alarms – all of which buy a caregiver time to re-institute the supervision.”

For the second scenario, the best preventive measure is to task a CPR-trained person to supervise swimmers using the lifeguarding method of eyes on the pool – with no distractions.

Both CDC and its partners urge parents to supervise their children around water carefully. Key water-safety partners include:

- [American Red Cross](#), which trains nearly two million people to swim and more than 170,000 lifeguards each year
- [US Army Corps of Engineers](#), the second-largest provider of US water recreational facilities;
- US Consumer Product Safety Commission, who oversees the safety of products such as pool alarms, pool drain systems, and others;
- [Safe Kids Worldwide](#), the only international nonprofit organization dedicated solely to preventing childhood injury; and
- [National Drowning Prevention Alliance](#), recently formed to address the factors associated with drowning.

Safe Kids Worldwide provides programs and hands-on training in unintentional injury and death prevention in 16 countries. Over the last 20 years, it has helped reduce the US child fatality rate from unintentional injury by 45 percent, saving the lives of an estimated 38,000 children. Program Manager Chrissy Cianflone says CDC research is critical to the information Safe Kids Worldwide provides to its coalitions nationally. “We take the information, statistics and tips and we put it into a friendly format for our 450 coalitions around the country to use in their communities.”

Water safety is one of Safe Kids Worldwide’s main risk areas. Its coalition in Homer, Alaska, began the [‘Kids Don’t Float’ PFD \(personal flotation device\) Loaner Program](#) in 1996, which lets people borrow life jackets at no cost and return them after use. The program has since expanded to 400 sites, with more expansion planned with funding from the US Coast Guard.

This spring, the organization released a state-by-state [summer ranking report](#) in conjunction with its annual National Kids Safety Week. The report showed drowning deaths among children ages 14 and under increase 89 percent in the summer over the average annual monthly rate, with 64 percent of all children’s drowning deaths occurring in the summer months.

### Lifeguard Veteran Offers Beach Precautions

According to B. Chris Brewster, president of the United States Lifesaving Association (USLA), the biggest mistake people make is going to beach locations where no lifeguards are present.

“It’s a good idea before you choose a beach location to find out if there are lifeguards available, and the hours and days they are working. If not, consider relocating,” he says.

Some of the biggest hazards in a non-surf beach, which often attract non-swimmers or less able swimmers, are sudden drop offs. Another problem involves people using flotation devices, such as noodles and inflatable rafts, to go places that they wouldn’t be able to swim.

“We have a saying on our website, ‘Don’t float where you can’t swim.’ You really want kids to understand that just because they’re on a blow-up raft, that doesn’t mean they should go some place they wouldn’t be able to swim. If they fall off or become separated from the toy, they need to be able to get to shore on their own.”



As an island state and popular tourism destination, Hawaii faces unique water-safety challenges, notes Ralph Goto of the Honolulu Emergency Services Department. *Photo by Hawaii State Dept. of Health*

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Hawaii’s drowning prevention strategy includes using pictogram signage, such as these to warn international visitors and residents of dangers in the water. *Photo by Hawaii State Dept. of Health*



Ileana Arias (third from the left) sees a demonstration of Hawaii’s pioneering use of personal watercraft in ocean rescues in Hanauma Bay Nature Preserve in 2006. *Photo by Hawaii State Dept. of Health*

### Water Safety Tips at a Glance

B. Chris Brewster, president of the United States Lifesaving Association (USLA), offers these life-saving tips for fun at the beach this summer. See [USLA's website](#) for full list of safety tips.

- Always go to a beach that has lifeguards
- Always check with the lifeguards on current conditions before you go into the water
- Never swim alone
- Watch your kids
- Don't float where you can't swim – avoid using a toy such as a raft or noodle to go anywhere to which you couldn't swim unaided
- Become familiar with what a rip current is and how to deal with it if a lifeguard isn't able to get right to you.

In surf environments, the biggest hazard is rip currents, which are the cause of more than 80 percent of ocean-beach rescues by USLA-affiliated lifeguards.

"If you are caught in a rip current, don't fight it 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," Brewster advises.

California has the most rescues from drowning at surf beaches, with 40,000 of the 60,000 drowning rescues reported at surf beaches each year occurring in California's three southern counties, San Diego, Orange and Los Angeles. "That is because of two factors – strong and consistent rip currents, and high attendance," Brewster says.

Using a Coast Guard-approved life vest (or life jacket) is always a good idea in open water and boating environments, adds Brewster. See Sidebar for more life-saving tips.

Ileana Arias, PhD, director, NCIPC, says the Center's goal is not to scare people from enjoying the water. "We are very interested in making sure people take full advantage of the fun and health effects of exercise in the water, but to do it in a safe way." She adds that swimming, unlike other recreational sports, is a life-saving skill for people of all ages.

States bordered by water have higher rates of drowning-related incidents in natural water, while communities in warmer climates have a higher prevalence of pool-related incidents. "Places like Arizona, California, and Florida have significant drowning problems because the residents have so much access to water and because of the tourism trade."

### Global Signage, PWC Rescues in Hawaii

Hawaii faces unique water-safety challenges, since it is an island state and a popular visitor destination, attracting seven million tourists each year from around the world.

"Drowning was the leading cause of unintentional injury death in the 0 to nine age group in 2004 (WISQARS), and is the fourth-leading cause of unintentional injury death for all age groups in Hawaii," notes Ralph Goto, BA, administrator for the Ocean Safety and Lifeguard Services Division in the Honolulu Emergency Services Department.

To combat this problem, Hawaii is using pictogram signage as part of its overall prevention strategy. The primary mission is to provide properly trained and equipped lifeguard personnel at Hawaii's most popular and high-risk beaches.

"Unfortunately, we cannot station lifeguards at every beach, hence the use of signage and other strategies to get safety messages to people before they get to the beach," says Goto.

A [new website](#) provides up-to-date near-shore and off-shore hazard conditions at all of Hawaii's lifeguarded beaches, based on NOAA wave buoy data and wind-forecast models.

Hawaii also pioneered the use of personal watercraft (PWC) in ocean rescues in high-surf situations (in waves 20 feet or higher). The PWC rescues use a modified body board attached to the back of the craft to transport patients and crew. Because lifeguards can pull the PWC straight onto the beach, they can immediately start CPR without moving the patient, especially if there is a potential neck injury.

### Wake-up Call in Arizona

Arizona has one of the highest rates for drowning among young children. Tim Flood, MD, bureau medical director with the Arizona Department of Health Services, clearly remembers his wake-up call after seeing Arizona's high drowning fatality rate, second in the country, from data in the Healthy People 1990 objectives 20 years ago.

"For a land-locked, desert state, it was surprising. The high rate was driven by drowning of young children in backyard swimming pools," recalls Flood. "Reducing the drowning rate in children has been a high personal priority

that I have committed a lot of time and energy to because these incidents are preventable.”

Flood says while Arizona still ranks high, its statewide drowning statistics are improving, with “child and toddler fatal drowning rates cut in half since the 1980s.” He credits public education, passage of a state barrier law in 1990 requiring a four-sided barrier to pools, and media attention to child drowning incidents.

Brewster notes that new lifeguard agencies have cropped up in both Destin and Walton County, Fla., following more drowning incidents as tourism has flourished. This doesn’t mean however, that they are omnipresent. “It’s important to remember that if a community has lifeguards it doesn’t mean they are on every beach. You need to do your homework,” he advises.

#### CDC Links:

[Water-related injuries fact sheet.](#)

[Swim Healthy, Swim Safely](#) (includes information on Recreation Water Illnesses and how to prevent them).

This *Inside Story* by Anne Sargent.

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