



Beach Safety 101

Experts offer advice for a safe day at the beach.

From death-defying rip currents and red-hot sun to jellyfish stings and shark attacks, the beach can be a pretty scary place. But it doesn't have to be. Experts tell WebMD that a day at the beach can be ... well ... a day at the beach -- when you know what to look out for.

"Swimming and water activities are very healthy so long as you use appropriate caution for yourself and your family when you visit the beach," says B. Chris Brewster, president of the United States Lifesaving Association (USLA), a national organization based in Huntington Beach, Calif. The first step is knowing where danger lurks and how to avoid it.

Conquering Rip Currents

Rip currents, often misnamed rip tides or undertows, occur when surf pushes water up the slope of the beach and then gravity pulls it back. This creates concentrated rivers of water moving offshore. They tend to form as waves disperse along the beach, causing water to become trapped between the beach and a sandbar or another underwater feature. The water converges into a narrow, river-like channel moving away from the shore at high speed. And they are anything but benign. In fact, about 80% of lifeguard rescues at ocean beaches are due to rip currents and 80% of drowning deaths are also due to rip currents, Brewster says. "Rip currents can occur at any surf beach and they tend to be more intense as surf size increases," Brewster says.

The best way to protect yourself from rip currents is to avoid them.

"Select a beach where lifeguards are present because the chances of drowning are 1 in 18 million if a lifeguard is present," he says. Sounds simple enough, but there are many beaches around the U.S. where no lifeguards are provided by the local community, he says. "Make sure beaches are staffed at the time you are swimming," he adds. "At some beaches, lifeguards are only staffed until 6 p.m., for example, so the mere fact that you go to a beach where a lifeguard is present doesn't mean a lifeguard will be present when you are swimming," he says. "Check with them before you swim and ask where the safe places are," he says. "It is their role to help you find the safest place [and] if there are no lifeguards present, you may find a kiosk or signs at beach access points listing such information."

If you do happen to get caught in a rip current, "swim to the side one way or the other until you no longer have difficulties or feel yourself being pulled," Brewster advises.

Whatever you do, "don't fight the current because these currents can move up to 8 knots, which is faster than an Olympic swimmer can swim," he says. "In many cases, you will be simply unable to overpower the rip current, so you'll want to outsmart it," he says.

Another option is to tread water until someone can assist you, Brewster suggests.

"Learn to swim in the environment where you are going to be swimming," Brewster says. "You may be a confident pool swimmer, but that doesn't prepare you for conditions on the North shore of Oahu in Hawaii," he says. "Always swim near a lifeguard and never swim alone," he says. "Even a very confident swimmer can experience difficulties and if there is an emergency and you are alone, you may not be noticed."

Alcohol and Swimming Don't Mix

"You should avoid alcohol while swimming," Brewster says. According to the USLA, alcohol can reduce your body temperature and impair your swimming ability as well as impair judgment, causing you to take unnecessary risks.

Float Where You Can Swim

"If you have a raft, don't take it any further from shore than you have the capability to swim," Brewster says. "If you are using a floating device such as a body board or raft, use a leash so that if you fall off, you don't lose the device," he recommends.

Steer Clear of Sharks

Each summer, we tend to hear about at least one horrific shark attack. In fact, in mid-June, a surfer died after a shark bit him in the left thigh in waters off northeastern Brazil that are known for large concentrations of sharks, according to media reports. But shark attacks are actually rather rare. In fact, worldwide there is an average of 50 to 70 shark attacks every year, according to statistics compiled by the International Shark Attack File.

"You are far more likely to be injured in a car accident driving to the beach than to ever even see a shark," says Brewster. To avoid becoming a statistic, "don't wear shiny jewelry or swim at dusk," Brewster suggests. "Shark bites are believed to be a result of prey identification mistakes where the shark thinks you are a fish or a seal."

Jumping Over Jelly Fish

"Generally you want to avoid any and all jelly fish," Brewster says. "If they are in the water, you may want to avoid the water or check with a lifeguard to determine what level of problems they are experiencing," he says. Still, "jelly fish stings tend to be annoyances rather than life-threatening events."

Mind the Water Quality

"Most communities test beach waters and are required to do so under federal legislation," Brewster says. "It's a good idea to find out what the water quality is before you go in because the results of poor water quality are gastrointestinal distress, ear infection, and occasionally more serious problems," he says. Some beaches will post updates on water quality, "but this is not something you can rely on as most testing is random and occurs on an infrequent basis," he explains. "By the time the signs are up, the water quality may have already been poor for over a day," he says. A good call is to avoid the ocean right after a rain fall. "If you have recently had heavy rainfall, there is a high likelihood that water quality may have degraded to at least some degree."

Slather on Sunscreen

Nothing can ruin a day at the beach like sunburn. Research has shown that sun exposure prior to the age of 18 significantly increases the risk of developing skin cancer later in life, including the potentially fatal melanoma. New research has shown that sunburns after the age of 20 also increase the risk of developing melanoma. "You can substantially reduce your risk of getting burnt and developing skin cancer by taking certain precautions," says Bruce Katz, MD, the director of the JUVA Skin and Laser Center in New York City.

"The first thing is wearing sunscreen, but it's not just about sun protection factor (SPF), it's also about the other ingredients," he says. Choose sunscreens with titanium dioxide or zinc oxide.

"These ingredients block both ultraviolet-B (UVB) and ultraviolet-A (UVA), while other ingredients block only UVB," he says. Choose an SPF of 15 or higher.

Remember that "none are sweat-proof or rub-proof, so they all have to be reapplied every two hours, particularly if you are sweating or swimming," he says. It's also important to wear hats with broad rims and sunglasses with protection built into the lenses. "The sunlight is most intense from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.," he says. "Be careful and stand under an umbrella, and remember that the sun is a lot stronger than it was 10 or 20 years ago because ozone has thinned out."

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