

*First Aid and Injury Prevention Series*  
**Water Safety**  
Safe Swimming and Water Activities

Swimming, especially during hot summer months, is an excellent way to keep cool and get some exercise to boot. However, while swimming is fun and good for you, that doesn't mean there are no risks involved. While the risk of drowning is always present, following some of the tips listed below can help you stay safe in the water this summer, and be ready to help in case something does go wrong.

This month's health tips are a continuation of a series. For this month and the next few months, we will be presenting you with common injuries you might encounter. This series will teach you the basics of how to lower your chances of these injuries, as well as some basic first aid so you can care for someone (or yourself) if you suffer these injuries. Please note that these health tips are for educational purposes only and are no replacement for a formal First Aid course or training. To find a First Aid class in your area so that you can be qualified and prepared to act in an emergency, see our Reference section below.

### **General Swim Safety**

No matter where you swim, here are some basic safety tips to help you be aware and avoid injuries:

- Take the time to learn to swim. It's never too late!
- Learn CPR so you can react in an emergency.
- If you are not confident in your swimming ability, or if you're boating (regardless of swimming ability), wear a coast guard approved floatation device. Floatation toys are not a replacement for a proper floatation device.
- Don't swim alone! Always have a buddy with you who can respond if you need help.
- Make sure children never swim unsupervised. Remain within arms' length of a child who is unable to swim or is a weak swimmer.
- Don't swim under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- Be aware if you're taking medications that might affect your balance, reaction time, coordination, or judgement, as these might increase the risk of drowning.
- Be aware of any medical conditions you might have (such as seizures, heart conditions, or disabilities that make swimming difficult) and plan accordingly.
- Be aware of your own limitations! Don't float anywhere you wouldn't be able to swim and be aware of depth and cut-off points.
- Avoid roughhousing, holding your breath for extended periods, or hyperventilating. Both can increase your risk of drowning, with the latter possibly increasing your risk of a blackout that leads to drowning.
- Don't swim unsupervised if you can help it. Remain in shallower areas where there are more people that can assist you if something happens.
- Have ready access to a cell phone in case of emergencies. When using public or semi-public pools, there will usually be an emergency phone available. Learn where it is and how to use it.
- Never dive into shallow water, or water whose depth you don't know, as this runs the risk of severe injury.

### **Drowning**

Drowning is one of the most dangerous and life-threatening accidents that can occur in or near water, and it can be more sudden and quieter than you might expect. As a result, it's a good idea to know what to look for and how to intervene.

- Watch for the common signs of drowning:

- Floating on or treading water,
  - Trying to swim to safety but unable to move forward,
  - Struggling to call for help,
  - Or struggling to keep their head above water to breathe.
- If you see someone is drowning, it's best to throw them a floatation device such as a life preserver or use a rescue hook if available.
- Unless you're trained for water rescue, don't jump in after someone who is drowning! While struggling, they might injure you and increase your risk of drowning.
- Make sure to call 911 if someone is drowning.
- If someone was drowning and loses consciousness, administer CPR until emergency services arrive.
- Make sure to keep up to date with any CPR training you might have so you can more effectively provide assistance.

### **Pool Safety**

In the state of Massachusetts (and many others), public and semi-public pools are regulated to ensure they follow basic safety measures. However, private pools have no such regulations, and just like any body of water, a pool runs the risk of drowning or other water-related injuries. So, when using your own private pool, keep the following in mind to help reduce those risks:

- As always, make sure someone is supervising swimmers, especially children, at all times.
- Keep a life preserver or shepherd's hook on-site at all times in the event someone is drowning.
- Always have a cell phone ready and available to call emergency services in the event of an injury.
- Make sure to keep a fence around your pool at least four feet in height, to reduce the risk of someone getting into the pool unsupervised.
- Make sure to keep a gate that's capable of being latched around your pool, to prevent unsupervised entry.
- Make sure your pool drain is covered with an approved drain cover to avoid entanglement and severe injury.

### **Safety in Natural Bodies of Water**

Natural bodies of water, like rivers, ponds, lakes, seas, and oceans, come with their own sets of dangers. While swimming in natural bodies of water can be fun and healthy, they are harder to control and can sometimes have unique sets of challenges, such as strong currents and the potential for poor water quality. Keep these factors in mind to reduce the risk of injuries:

- Keep in mind the water's temperature! Cold and icy water can quickly lower body temperature and even cause shock. If in cold water, consider wearing a wet suit for added protection, and avoid going into water that is too cold.
- Make sure to mind any "no swimming" signs! If you see a sign like this for a water body, don't go deeper than your ankles at the most.
- Mind water depth. Natural water bodies (especially larger water bodies) can have very steep drop-off points and changes in depth.
- Natural water bodies can have debris (like large sticks, rocks, and other flotsam) that can cause injuries. Be aware and avoid water that has too much debris.
- Natural water bodies have a higher chance of being polluted or have naturally occurring bacteria and algae that can make you sick. Avoid swallowing water while swimming anywhere, but especially natural water bodies.
- Remember that natural water bodies often have poorer water visibility. The water might be cloudy or dark. Be aware of your surroundings and always swim with others.
- Natural bodies of water may often have currents. Some are visible as off-color patches of water, foamy water, or water with excess debris. But other currents are not immediately apparent.

- Currents can be unpredictable near large rocks, jetties, piers, and other large objects, and can lead to injury if you're not careful.
- If you get caught in a current, don't fight against it! Try to swim with the current and stay parallel to shore, and swim to shore when able.

## References

### *CPR/First Aid Training*

**American Heart Association** - <https://cpr.heart.org/en>

**American Red Cross** – <https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class>

### *General Reference*

**Massachusetts Reference Page for Where to Learn to Swim** – [www.mass.gov/service-details/learn-to-swim](http://www.mass.gov/service-details/learn-to-swim)

**CDC Drowning Prevention Factsheet** - [cdc.gov/drowning/prevention/index.html](https://cdc.gov/drowning/prevention/index.html)

**CDC Children's Swimming Safety Factsheet** – [cdc.gov/healthyschools/bam/safety/water-safety.htm](https://cdc.gov/healthyschools/bam/safety/water-safety.htm)

**MA Swimming Safety Factsheet** - [mass.gov/service-details/water-safety-for-everyone](http://mass.gov/service-details/water-safety-for-everyone)

**MA Pool Safety Factsheet** - [mass.gov/service-details/safety-tips-for-pool-owners](http://mass.gov/service-details/safety-tips-for-pool-owners)

**MA Natural Water Body Safety Factsheet** – [mass.gov/service-details/staying-safe-in-oceans-lakes-rivers-and-ponds](http://mass.gov/service-details/staying-safe-in-oceans-lakes-rivers-and-ponds)