

WORK ZONE

Drowning: Navy/Marine Corps Leading Recreational Killer

- An airman goes to the ocean with two companions and decides to go swimming at night, with no lifeguard present. The water temperature is 60 degrees F, the air temperature 51 degrees F, and the wind is at one knot when the airman, wearing only shorts, enters the water. He disappears about five minutes later and dies from drowning as a result of hypothermia.

- An E-6 enters a hotel's swimming pool. The water, according to witnesses, is cloudy—to the point where you can't see bottom. No lifeguard is on duty. While swimming laps underwater, the E-6 becomes tired and has to be pulled from the pool. Efforts to revive him with CPR are unsuccessful.

- An E-5 and an O-4 wade inside a protective reef when a rip tide and undertow sweep them over the reef and out to sea. They maintain contact for a short period of time—long enough for a boat to rescue the O-4 a mile out from shore. The E-5, however, drowns.

Casualties like these are the reason why, according to the Naval Safety Center database, drowning ranks as the leading cause of recreational deaths in both the Navy and Marine Corps. Nationwide, drowning is the fourth leading cause of accidental deaths.

What can we do to avoid these tragedies?

Learn to assess the risks, make risk decisions, and implement controls. Here are some specific tips to avoid swimming mishaps:

- Learn to swim well enough to survive an emergency.
- Always swim with a buddy who has the ability to help you in an emergency.

- Avoid using alcohol, which depresses the central nervous system and impairs performance, even at low doses (0.02 percent). Alcohol, combined with at-risk behavior, often leads to deadly consequences.

- Swim only in supervised areas.
- Follow the safety rules for the particular pool or beach area. Pay attention to warnings about local hazards, such as currents.
- Know your limitations, and don't overestimate your ability.
- Stay out of the water when overheated, immediately after eating, and during an electrical storm.
- Check the depth before diving into the water.
- Keep a safe distance from diving boards and platforms.
- Don't substitute inflated tubes, air mattresses, or other artificial supports for swimming ability. If a flotation device is needed as a safety aid, use a U.S. Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device.
- Learn the simple and safe reaching-rescue techniques. Only certified lifeguards should dive in to rescue a drowning victim. The American Red Cross offers courses in water rescue.
- Avoid overexposure to the sun; use plenty of sunscreen lotion. ☀

Resources:

- <http://www.cdc.gov/node.do/id/0900f3ec8016eb51> [*Swim Healthy, Swim Safely*]
- [http://www.redcross.org/services/hss/aquatics/\[Swimming and Lifeguarding\]](http://www.redcross.org/services/hss/aquatics/[Swimming and Lifeguarding])
- <http://www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=001047&tid=024> [*Think Safety Before Swimming*].

Navy photo by JO3 Stephen P. Weaver