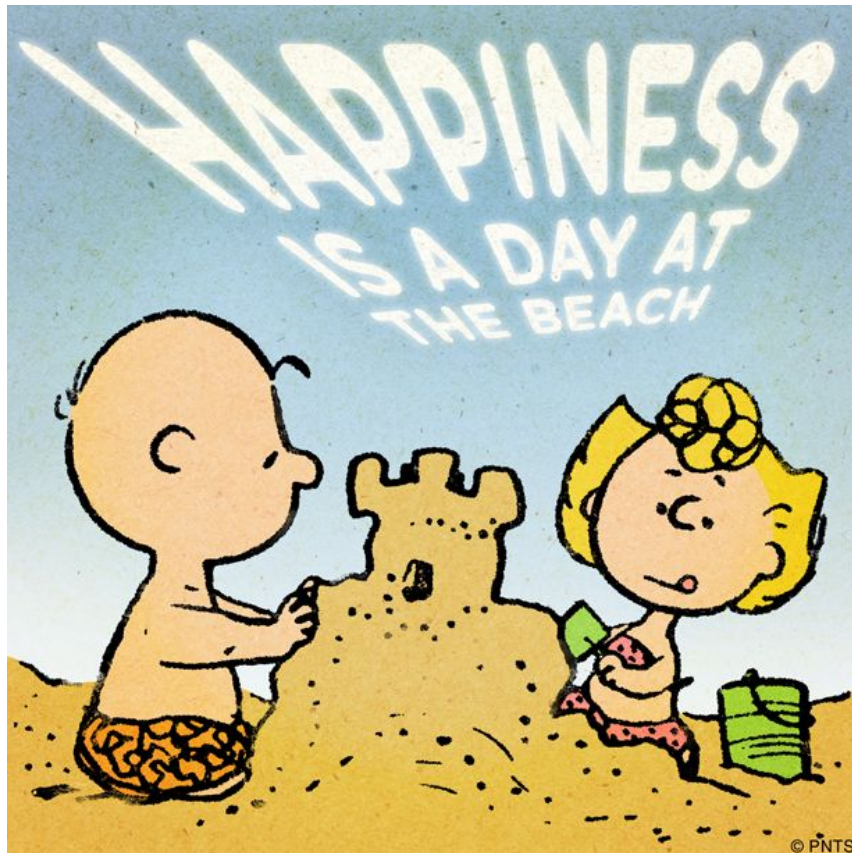


From the Health Clinic



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Water Safety

Pools, lakes, ponds, and beaches mean summer fun and cool relief from hot weather. But water also can be dangerous for children if parents do not take the proper precautions. Nearly 1,000 children die each year by drowning. Most drownings happen in home swimming pools. It is the second leading cause of accidental death for people between the ages of 5 and 24.

The good news is there are many ways to keep your children safe in the water - and make sure that they take the right precautions when they are on their own.

Keeping Children Safe

Children need constant supervision around water - whether the water is in a bathtub, a wading pool, an ornamental fish pond, a swimming pool, a spa, the beach, or a lake.

Young children are especially at risk - they can drown in less than 2 inches of water. That means drowning can happen where you would least expect it - the sink, the toilet bowl, fountains, buckets, inflatable pools, or small bodies of standing water around your home, such as ditches filled with rainwater. Always watch children closely when they are in or near any water.

If you are not a swimmer yourself, it is a good idea to take lessons and learn how to swim. And children over 4 years old should learn, too (check the local recreation center for classes taught by qualified instructors). Children who are younger (but older than age 1) also might benefit from swimming lessons, but check with your pediatrician first.

Do not assume that a child who knows how to swim is not at risk for drowning. All children need to be supervised in the water, no matter what their swimming skills. And infants, toddlers, and weak swimmers should have an adult swimmer within arm's reach to provide "touch supervision."

Invest in proper-fitting, Coast Guard-approved flotation devices (life vests) and have children wear them whenever near water. Check the weight and size recommendations on the label, then have your child try it on to make sure it fits snugly. For children younger than 5 years old, choose a vest with a strap between the legs and head support - the collar will keep the child's head up and face out of the water. Inflatable vests and arm devices such as water wings are **not** effective protection against drowning.

Do not forget the sunscreen and reapply often, especially if the children are getting wet. UV sunglasses, hats, and protective clothing also can help provide sun protection.

Children should drink plenty of fluids, particularly water, to prevent dehydration. It's easy to get [dehydrated](#) in the sun, especially when kids are active and sweating. Dizziness, feeling lightheaded, or nausea are just some of the signs of dehydration and overheating.

Water temperature is important, too. Enter the water slowly and make sure it feels comfortable for you and your kids. A temperature below 70°F is cold to most swimmers. Recommended water temperatures vary depending on the activity and a swimmer's age, as well as for pregnant women. But in general, 82°-86°F is comfortable for recreational swimming for children (babies are more comfortable when the water is on the warmer side of this temperature range).

Body temperature drops more quickly in water than on land, and it does not take long for hypothermia (when the body loses heat faster than it can produce it) to set

in. If a child is shivering or has muscle cramps, get him or her out of the water immediately.

At Home and at the Pool

Water safety begins in the home.

The bathroom is full of dangers for youngsters. Never leave a young child unattended in the bathroom, especially while bathing - even if the child appears to be well propped in a safety tub or bath ring. Put away hair dryers and all other electrical appliances to avoid the risk of electrocution.

Hot water also can be dangerous, particularly for children younger than 5, who have thinner skin than older children and adults, so can burn more easily. Just 3 seconds of exposure to hot tap water that's 140°F can give a child a third-degree burn.

You can reduce the risk of scalding by turning the water heater thermostat in your home down to 120°F and by always testing the water with your wrist or elbow before placing your child in the bath.

Outside the home, being aware can help prevent accidents. Find out where the water hazards in your neighborhood are. Who has a pool or hot tub? Where are the retaining ponds or creeks that may attract children? Tell neighbors who have pools that you have a young child and ask them to keep their gates locked.

Home Pools

Having a pool, pond, spa, or hot tub on your property is a tremendous responsibility when it comes to safety.

Hot tubs may feel great to adults, but children can become dangerously overheated in them and can even drown - so it is best not to let them use them at all. Having a fence (one that goes directly around the pool or spa) between the water and your house is the best safety investment you can make and will help prevent pool-related drownings.

According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), fences should meet these standards:

- Fences should stand at least 4 feet high with no foot or handrails for kids to climb on.
- The slats should be less than 4 inches apart so a child cannot get through, or if chain link, should have no opening larger than 1¾ inches.
- Gates should be self-closing and self-latching, and the latch should be out of kids' reach.

You can buy other devices, such as pool covers and alarms, but these have not been proved effective against drowning for very young children, so fencing remains your best measure of protection.

Making Children Water Wise

It is important to teach your children proper pool and spa behavior, and to make sure that you take the right precautions, too. Let children know that they should contact the lifeguard or an adult if there is an emergency.

Children should not run or push around the pool and should never dive in areas that are not marked for diving. If the weather turns bad (especially if there is lightning) they should get out of the pool immediately.

Above all, supervise your children at all times. Do not assume that just because your child took swimming lessons or is using a flotation device such as an inner tube or inflatable raft that there is no drowning risk. If you are at a party, it is especially easy to become distracted, so designate an adult who will be responsible for watching the children. If you leave your child with a babysitter, make sure he or she knows your rules for the pool.

Seconds count when it comes to water emergencies, so take a cordless phone with you when you are watching children during water play. A quick-dial feature keyed to 911 or your local emergency center will also save additional seconds. If you receive a call while supervising children, keep your conversation brief to prevent being distracted.

Once you have installed all your safety equipment, review your home for water hazards and plan what to do in an emergency. Learn CPR (other caregivers should learn it, too) and make sure you have safety equipment, such as emergency flotation devices, that are in good shape and are close at hand when boating or swimming.

Post emergency numbers on all phones and make sure all caregivers are aware of their locations. After your children are finished playing in the pool for the day, be sure to remove all pool toys and put them away. Children have drowned while trying to retrieve playthings left in the pool.

Keep water safety a priority, even after the swim season is over. Pools with covers are not safe; many kids try to walk on top of pools during the winter months and may get trapped underneath a pool cover.

In addition, icy pools, ponds, and streams are tempting play areas for children, so keep your pool gates locked and teach your children to stay away from water without your supervision. If you have an above-ground pool, it is wise to always lock or remove the ladder when the pool is not in use.

Water Safety Outdoors

First, teach children never to swim alone. Using the buddy system means there is always someone looking out for you. Make sure your children understand that

swimming in a pool is different from swimming in a lake or the ocean - there are different hazards for each.

Here are some tips:

At Lakes and Ponds

- Do not let children swim without adult supervision - lakes or ponds might be shallow near the bank, but increase in depth sharply farther out from shore.
- Ponds and lakes may hide jagged rocks, broken glass, or trash.
- Make sure children wear foot protection; even in the water, they should wear aqua socks or water shoes.
- Watch out for weeds and grass that could entangle a leg or arm.

At Beaches

Teach children to always swim when and where a lifeguard is on duty. They should not swim close to piers or pilings because sudden water movements may cause swimmers to collide with them.

- Unlike the calm waters of a swimming pool, the beach has special dangers like currents and tides. Check with the lifeguard when you arrive to find out about the water conditions.
- Do not allow children to swim in large waves or undertows, and tell them never to stand with their back to the water because a sudden wave can easily knock them over.
- Teach children that if they are caught in a rip current or undertow, they should swim parallel to the shore or should tread water and call for a lifeguard's help.
- The stings of jellyfish can be painful, so tell children to watch out for them in the water and to tell an adult right away if they are stung.

Whether at the lake or at the beach, teach your child to get out of the water during bad weather, especially lightning.

At Water Parks

Water parks can be a lot of fun for children, as long as you keep safety in mind. Before you go, make sure the park is monitored by qualified lifeguards. Once there, read all posted signs before letting your child on any rides (many rides have age, height, weight, or health requirements, and each has a different depth of water).

Teach your children to follow all rules and directions, such as walking instead of running and always going down the water slide in the right position - feet first and face up. A Coast-Guard approved life jacket is a good idea, too.

Know which rides are appropriate for your child's age and development. For example, wave pools can quickly go from calm to rough, putting even a good swimmer in over his or her head. Younger children can be intimidated by older children splashing and roughhousing.

What to Do in an Emergency

Whenever a child is missing, always check the pool first. Survival depends on a quick rescue and restarting breathing as soon as possible:

- If you find a child in the water, immediately get the child out while calling loudly for help. If someone else is available, have them call 911. Check to make sure the child's air passages are clear. If the child is not breathing, start CPR if you are trained to do so. When the emergency number is called, follow the instructions the emergency operators provide.
- If you think the child may have suffered a neck injury, such as from diving, keep the child on his or her back and brace the neck and shoulders with your hands and forearms to help keep the neck from moving until emergency help arrives. This type of immobilization minimizes further injury to the spine and is best done by someone who is trained in the technique. Keep the child still and speak in calm tones to keep the child comforted. Continue to watch for adequate breathing.

Waterborne Illnesses

Water illnesses can happen when someone has contact with, swallows, or breathes in water that is contaminated with germs. This can happen in a swimming pool, hot tub, water fountain, water park, lake, or ocean.

Most such infections are diarrhea-related and often are caused by the parasite *Cryptosporidium*, which normally lives in the gastrointestinal tract and is found in feces. Other infections can affect the skin, eyes, ears, and respiratory tract. Children, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems can be the most affected by these infections.

A few tips to protect against recreational water illnesses:

- Children with diarrhea should not swim.
- Take children on bathroom breaks often and change swim diapers often (not at the poolside).
- If you are taking a baby in the water who is not potty trained, use a swim diaper.
- Wash hands after using the bathroom or changing diapers.
- Avoid swallowing or getting water in your mouth.
- Keep a pool's water clean by showering before entering the pool.

- After swimming, dry ears well with a towel/washcloth, tilting each ear down to help water drip out of the ear canal. This can help prevent swimmer's ear (an ear infection due to trapped water in the ear canal).

Water Safety and Babies

Drowning is not the only concern when babies are exposed to water. Infants are particularly susceptible to diseases that can spread through water.

After a dip, wash your baby with a mild soap and shampoo the hair to remove pool chemicals. Also dry the baby's ears carefully with a towel or cotton ball to help prevent swimmer's ear.

Water temperatures below 85°F can cause babies to lose heat quickly, putting them at risk for hypothermia (when body temperature falls below normal). Shivering infants or those whose lips are turning blue should be removed from the water immediately, dried, and kept in a towel.

Infants also can spread disease in a pool. *Cryptosporidium* can be released into pools by babies with leaky diapers. When swallowed by other swimmers, the parasite can cause severe diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, weight loss, and dehydration.

The safest thing to do is to keep your baby out of public pools until the child is potty trained. If you do decide to take the baby in for a dip, use waterproof diapers only and change the diapers often (but not poolside!), washing your child well each time. Keep any child with diarrhea or a gastrointestinal illness out of the pool during the illness and for 2 weeks afterward. Provide frequent bathroom breaks for children who are already toilet trained.

Water play can be a great source of fun and exercise. You will enjoy the water experience more by knowing and practicing these safety precautions.

