

DDD PREVENTION BULLETIN | **SWIMMING & WATER SAFETY AWARENESS**



Water activities can provide enjoyment, exercise, and social opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Adults with IDD face a significantly elevated risk around water compared to the general population. Drowning is fast, silent, and preventable. Safe participation requires active supervision, preparation, and consistent safety practices.

Disability-related risk factors:

- Motor and balance challenges
- Low muscle tone/weakness
- Seizure disorders
- Communication barriers/
Limited safety awareness/
Sensory Differences
- Wandering/Walkaway/Elopement



Common misconceptions:

- Drowning is loud, slow, obvious and only happens in deep water
- Strong swimming skills and pool fences prevent drowning
- Leaving someone alone for a few minutes is safe

Practical Steps to Keep Adults with IDD Safe around Water

Environmental Safety

- Use caution around lakes, rivers, beaches, and water parks due to currents, waves, and uneven surfaces.
- Swim only where a lifeguard is present.
- Use U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets for all water activities.
- Use bright-colored swimwear for increased visibility.
- Consider GPS devices for individuals at risk of wandering.
- Call 911 first and check the water areas first if someone is missing.
- Avoid swimming during hazardous weather, strong waves and rip currents.
- Empty inflatable pools immediately after use.
- Conduct routine inspections of pools, docks, life jackets, alarms, gates, and other water safety equipment year-round.

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Practical Steps to Keep Adults with IDD Safe around Water (cont.)

Water Safety Preparation

- Ensure staff know CPR and emergency procedures.
- Ensure proper staffing ratios for community outings.
- Review missing-person and emergency response plans regularly.
- Clearly assign supervision responsibilities during outings.
- Practice water emergency drills and rescue steps.
- Post/Reinforce water safety rules using visual supports, social stories, and repetition.
- Secure pools with locked gates and fencing.
- Never rely on pool covers or inflatable items for safety.
- Encourage swimmers to practice “Stop and Wait” rules.

Supervision/Individualized Supports:

- Never leave individuals unattended near water.
- Collaborate with local swim facilities (YMCAs, JCCs, Special Olympics, recreation departments, swim schools, etc.) to promote adaptive swim lessons for individuals as appropriate.
- Provide sensory supports, shaded areas, hydration, and rest breaks as needed.
- Designate a “Water Watcher” responsible for active supervision without distractions (i.e., side conversations, phones).
- Provide touch/arm’s length supervision for individuals with seizure disorders and challenges with judgement.
- Ensure 1:1 support for individuals with mobility issues.
- Ensure individuals are wearing SPF 30 or higher sunscreen and SPF-protected clothing and hats.

Emergency Preparedness:

Always know:

- Who will call 911.
- Who will perform rescue efforts.
- The exact location/address of the water site.
- Follow first aid, CPR and aquatic emergency response training.
- Where rescue equipment and emergency contacts are located.
- Incident report notifications can be made to DDD 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by dialing **1-800-832-9173**.

Water Safety Saves Lives

With proactive supervision, preparation, and individualized supports, adults with IDD can safely enjoy swimming and water activities while reducing preventable risks.



If you have any questions regarding this material or would like to schedule a training, please contact the DDD Resource Team at ddd.resourceteam@dhs.nj.gov