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NEWS

How can you avoid being bitten by a shark? What to know before swimming in Florida waters

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As locals and tourists alike hit the Florida beaches this summer, there might be something in the back of their minds while enjoying their beach day: sharks. And for good reason.

Two teenagers and a woman were injured in two shark attacks less than two hours apart last week in the Florida Panhandle.

According to officials, the woman lost her lower left arm and suffered "significant trauma" to other areas of her body. One of the teenagers had significant injuries to the upper leg and one hand, and the other had minor injuries on one foot.

“We encourage all of our beach patrons to be situationally aware in the water today, swim near a lifeguard, stay hydrated, and look out for each other,” the South Walton Fire District said in an update on its Facebook page Sunday. “Please do not underestimate the open water and any of the marine life that could be present.”

With its 825 miles of beaches lining the state, it's a given that sharks would be patrolling the Florida waters within their natural habitat. But what makes the state stick out like a sore thumb when it comes to shark attacks?

But first: Where did the most recent Florida shark attacks happen?

The shark bites occurred in Walton County on the Florida Panhandle, with both incidents happening between Miramar Beach and Panama City Beach.

At about 1:20 p.m. Friday, a 45-year-old woman was swimming with her husband past the first sandbar near Founders Lane in Watersound Beach, west of Seacrest Beach when she

was bitten.

"She received significant trauma to the midsection and pelvic area," said South Walton Fire District Fire Chief Ryan Crawford at a press conference Friday, "as well as amputation of the left lower arm."

About an hour and a half later, just before 3 p.m., two girls aged 15 and 17 were swimming with friends in waist-deep water near the Sandy Shores Court area of Seacrest Beach, about four miles east of the first bite. The girls were swimming just inside the first sandbar, Crawford said, in a similar proximity to the shoreline as the previous attack.

"Victim one received significant injuries to one upper and one lower extremity," Crawford said. "Victim number two received what's been described as flesh wounds to the right lower extremity."

The victims were flown to hospitals in Pensacola and Destin. One of the teen girls and the 45-year-old woman were reported to be in critical condition with the other teen girl was in stable condition.

As of Monday, the beaches have been reopened with officials advising beachgoers to remain cautious. There have not been any updates on any of three victims.

Why are sharks so common in Florida?

Florida has one of the largest year-round concentrations of sharks. Scientific data from the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission shows that many shark species migrate in and out of Florida's waters each year.

These migrations are often linked to temperature and the presence of prey such as mullet, sardines, menhaden and other species of baitfish.

How many people are usually bitten in Florida each year?

According to the International Shark Attack File, the state saw 16 cases last year, whi represent 44% of the U.S. total and 23% of unprovoked bites worldwide. This is lower Florida’s recent five-year annual average of 19 incidents per year.

What is the most dangerous beach in Florida for shark bites?

New Smyrna Beach in Volusia County is known as the "shark bite capital of the world."

The beach saw five unprovoked shark bites last year. Volusia County alone has reported 351 unprovoked shark bites since 1882, according to ISAF.

How many shark bites have been fatal?

The ISAF wrote that were 14 confirmed shark-related fatalities last year, ten of which were assigned as unprovoked. This number is higher than the five-year annual global average of six unprovoked fatalities per year.

Of Florida's 16 unprovoked bites last year, none were fatal. The last fatal shark attack in Florida was in 2010 when 38-year-old kiteboarder Stephen Howard Schafer died from massive blood loss following an attack by at least one shark in the ocean off Stuart Beach.

Researchers stress that fatal shark bites are extremely rare. In a USA TODAY article, it was revealed that the odds of dying as a result of a shark attack in the U.S. is 1 in 3,748,067.

How close do sharks swim to shore?

Sharks usually stay within a range of 60-100 feet from shore; however, Florida Museum of Natural History research has found that most shark attacks occur within 6 to 10 feet of land.

What month are sharks most active?

According to the International Shark Attack File, September has the most frequent unprovoked attacks by sharks on Florida beaches. Since 1926, roughly 17% of unprovoked shark attacks in Florida have happened in September.

What breed of sharks mostly bite humans?

The ISAF reported earlier this year that 36% of unprovoked shark bites in Florida were caused by requiem sharks, which are 50 species of small to large sharks. Additionally, 16% of bites were from bull sharks and 15% by blacktip sharks.

However, the University of Florida notes that all sharks, regardless of size, are predators and could be capable of inflicting wounds if provoked.

How can you avoid being bitten by a shark?

While the chances of being bitten by a shark are very rare, the FWC offers some tips on how to avoid being attacked while out in the ocean:

- Always stay in groups since sharks are more likely to bite a solitary individual.
- Do not wander too far from shore; this isolates an individual and places him or her far away from assistance.
- Avoid being in the water during darkness or twilight hours when sharks are most active.
- Do not enter the water if bleeding from an open wound or if menstruating — a shark's ability to smell blood is acute.
- Wearing shiny jewelry is discouraged. When light reflects off shiny jewelry, it resembles the sheen of fish scales.
- Avoid waters with known discharges or sewage and waters used for any type of fishing — especially if there are signs of baitfishes or feeding activity. Diving seabirds, which frequently feed on baitfishes, are good indicators of such activity.
- While there are myths and anecdotes about dolphins saving humans from shark bites, the presence of dolphins does not indicate the absence of sharks — both often eat the same foods.
- Use extra caution when the waters are murky.
- Remember that sharks see contrast particularly well. Uneven tans and bright-colored clothing may draw a shark's attention.
- Refrain from excess splashing, as this may draw a shark's attention.
- Do not allow pets in the water; their erratic movements may draw a shark's atten
- Be careful when occupying the area between sandbars or near steep drop-offs — t are favorite hangouts for sharks.

- Swim only in areas tended by lifeguards.
- Do not enter the water if sharks are known to be present, and get out of the water if sharks are sighted.
- Never harass a shark.

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