



News Release

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Cold water can kill; late spring conditions increase drowning risks

Nearly 100 people drown in Washington each year

OLYMPIA — Icy water temperatures can cause cold water shock that can immobilize even strong swimmers in as few as five minutes —eventually leading to hypothermia.

In Washington, drowning risks peak in summer months, but during the month of May, there are usually several drowning deaths on warm spring days when people, especially kids and teens, are eager to get in the water to swim, or go rafting or boating.

“Warm weather is coming and that means people are headed for fun on the water, but that fun can quickly lead to drowning,” said Gary Fraser of the agency’s Water Recreation Program. “Most of these heart-breaking deaths could be prevented by wearing a life vest and following some basic water-safety precautions.”

Drowning is a leading cause of unintentional death for children, and near-drowning injuries [cause permanent disability](#) for many more. Teens, especially boys, are at higher risk because they’re more likely to do risky things like trying to swim across a river, and are less likely to wear life jackets than are teenage girls, young children, and older people.

The Department of Health urges parents to make sure everyone in the family has a size-appropriate life vest, knows how to swim, and is aware of the safety rules and expectations in and around water.

Rafters and anyone planning a river activity should always check [river levels and conditions](#) before leaving home. Runoff from mountain snowmelt and rain can create high, fast-moving water that can carry debris and be treacherous. It is best to avoid areas in rivers and streams with branches or trees in the water, because they can pull or hold a person under.

Drowning can often be prevented

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Rafters should also stay far away from waterfalls, sudden drops, or any structures like bridges or dams.

Here are a few more important swimming safety guidelines:

- Choose a supervised area. A trained lifeguard who can help in an emergency is the best safety factor.
- Never swim alone. Even good swimmers can have an unexpected medical emergency in the water. Always assign a “designated adult” to watch children around water, including at swimming parties.
- Select an area that has good water quality and safer natural conditions. Murky water, hidden underwater objects, unexpected drop-offs, and aquatic plants are hazards.
- Check how shallow water is by going feet first before diving in. Each year, many swimmers are seriously injured by diving headfirst into water that is too shallow.
- Have a plan for water emergencies: learn CPR and water rescue tips, have a cell phone for calling 911, and carry an extra floatation device to give to a person in distress.
- Most drowning happens quickly and silently, without the expected splashing, flailing, or yelling for help.

More [information on Washington](#) and [state statistics on drowning](#) is available on our website.

The Department of Health [Water Recreation](#) and [Injury Prevention](#) programs work to make water recreation safer, and to prevent water-related illnesses and injuries.

The [Department of Health website](#) (doh.wa.gov) is your source for *a healthy dose of information*.

Also, [find us on Facebook](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#).

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