



Water Safety for Teens 12 to 18 Years

As your child becomes a teen, you will likely have less control over their actions in and around water. Teens are much more likely to swim in open water without lifeguards, like lakes, rivers and marine waters. Peer pressure may cause your teen to try risky new activities they might not be ready for.

Know the risks for your teen

Teens put themselves at risk when they:

- Misjudge their swimming ability. Teens have drowned while trying to swim across a lake or river. Cold water and currents can overpower the skills of even a good swimmer or athlete. The conditions can take away their strength before they know it.
- Dive, swing or jump into shallow water or are not aware of hazards or objects that can't be seen from the surface. Teens are more likely than any other age group to suffer diving injuries, many of which result in spinal cord damage or death.
- Delay getting help. Teens most often drown when they are with friends. Teens have died because their friends didn't know they were in trouble or thought they were joking and then did not know how to respond.
- Use alcohol and drugs around water. One half of all drownings in teen males are tied to alcohol use. Alcohol affects judgment and swimming skills. It also increases the effects of hypothermia.
- Boat or swim in unguarded water without a life jacket.
- Are not aware of the dangers of cold water and currents. Swimming in open water is not like swimming in a pool.

Take action

Know your teen's limits:

- If your teen is not a strong swimmer, sign them up for lessons. Knowing how to float, tread water and swim to safety are critical survival skills. Ask about teen-only swim lessons or options for taking adult lessons.
- Know where your teen is going and have a system for checking in. Tell them it's important to swim in guarded areas and to use the buddy system.
- Practice problem-solving with your teen. "It is a warm April night and your buddies want to go swimming at a local beach; you don't feel OK going along. What can you do?"
- Talk with your teen about diving into shallow or unknown water. Teach them to only dive in water that is at least nine feet deep.
- Spend time as a family talking about how to stay safe by identifying risks like cold water, high water, river and rip currents. Check into local recreation and outdoor programs that teach outdoor water safety.

Know the water

Washington State's lakes and rivers are cold enough to cause hypothermia, even in the summer and even among the strongest swimmers. Hypothermia can happen very quickly. It occurs when the body temperature lowers. This leads to a loss of the strength that is needed to swim. A life jacket can reduce heat loss, keep you afloat and more than double survival time.

At any time of year, Washington waters can be appealing and dangerous at the same time:

- **Spring** - Rivers are often high and swift from rains and snow melt and can easily overwhelm the strongest swimmer. Even on hot spring days, lakes, ponds, and rivers are still cold and are dangerous for swimmers. Hypothermia can occur quickly in very cold water.
- **Summer** - Water that is warm on the surface, may be much colder below. Use caution when swimming and always supervise young children playing in or near the water. Rivers may not be moving as fast, but log jams can trap swimmers and large rocks and logs could tip over rafts, canoes, and kayaks. Illnesses can be prevented by not swallowing the water.
- **Autumn** - Early warm days of autumn can be like summer. But like spring, this time of year is unpredictable - be prepared for sudden weather changes and cold water later in the season.
- **Winter** - Waters are always cold and can quickly go from being very calm to very rough, especially during storms. If you are on the water for hunting, fishing, or recreation, wear protective gear and life jackets. Tell someone where you are going and when you plan to return, and be prepared for sudden weather changes.

Drownings are preventable

The statistics for Washington State are grim, drowning is the second-leading cause of unintentional injury death for kids in this state. While drowning rates continue to decline, an average of 27 children under the age of 18 drown in this state each year. The two groups of children most at risk are teens between 15 and 17, and youngsters between the ages of 1 and 4.

- Most of the drowning victims are people who are swimming, boating, or just playing in or near water.

Based in part by a number of boating-related drowning deaths, the Washington Legislature passed a law that requires boaters age 12 and older to pass a boating safety course or an equivalency exam before operating a motorboat with an engine of 15 or more horsepower. That law went into effect on Jan. 1, 2008.

This information provided by to you by the IES safety committee