Drowning a Leading Cause of Death for All Ages

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Nothing beats the heat like a dip in a nearby lake, river, or swimming pool. Our natural water bodies are one of Montana’s great attractions for tourists and residents alike.

But as this summer’s headlines have shown, water recreation can turn deadly all too quickly and easily.

Drowning may not be on our mind when we’re enjoying ourselves at the pool or beach. Yet it’s the nation’s sixth leading cause of death, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). From 2005 to 2014, an average of 3,800 Americans drowned each year – that’s a little over 10 a day. About a fifth of those were children 14 or younger.

And here’s an interesting statistic: two-thirds of people who drowned never even intended to get in the water!

Of course, statistics can’t begin to describe the tragedy of a life lost to drowning. Even if someone can be revived, he may have severe brain damage that can cause long-term problems with memory, learning, and basic functioning.

So read on for some steps to help prevent drowning. We don’t mean to put a damper on your next recreational outing. We just hope you’ll take these recommendations to heart. They may save your life, or help you to save another’s.

Preventing Drowning

Learn to swim. Taking part in formal swimming lessons reduces the risk of drowning, especially among children. Yet many people don’t have basic skills, like the ability to float or move through the water. Check with the Last Chance Splash Waterpark, the East Helena Pool, the Helena Family YMCA, or your local fitness center to find out about lessons near you. You’re never too young or old to learn or to improve your skills.

Learn CPR. Seconds count when someone is drowning. CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) performed by bystanders has been shown to save lives and improve outcomes in drowning victims.
Check with the American Red Cross or the American Heart Association to find out about CPR classes near you.

**Wear life jackets.** Half of all boating deaths might be prevented with the use of life jackets. Make sure kids always wear them in and around natural bodies of water, even if they know how to swim. Weaker swimmers can wear them in and around pools, too. Water wings and other “floaties” are no substitute.

**Supervise closely.** Drowning can happen quickly and quietly anywhere there’s water and even in the presence of lifeguards. Supervise kids closely at all times when they’re near or in the water. Don’t do anything that might distract you, like playing cards, reading books, talking on the phone, and using alcohol or drugs. Never leave a child unattended near water, not even for a minute.

**Use the buddy system.** Regardless of your age, always swim with a buddy. Select swimming sites that have lifeguards whenever possible.

**Avoid alcohol use.** Alcohol and water do not mix! Among teens and adults, alcohol use is involved in up to 70 percent of deaths associated with water recreation. Even one drink can influence your balance, coordination, and judgment, and the effects are heightened by sun exposure and heat.

**Practice safe boating.** Check your boat for all required safety equipment. Make sure you and your passengers actually wear life jackets; it’s not enough just to have them on board. Make sure you know how many people your boat will safely hold, and don’t overload.

**Never dive into lakes and rivers.** All too often, hidden dangers like rocks and debris lurk beneath the surface of the water. Every year, thousands of people suffer paralyzing spinal cord injuries when they dive head-first into hidden obstacles. Always enter the water feet first.

**Mind the weather.** Check the local weather conditions and forecast before swimming or boating. Strong winds and thunderstorms with lightning are dangerous.

**Signs of Drowning**

A person can drown quickly and quietly. Unlike in the movies, they usually don’t scream, wave their arms, or call for help. Children can slip silently under the water while caregivers and lifeguards look on.

So how can you tell when someone needs help? Here are some signs that you shouldn’t ignore:

- The person is low in the water, with their mouth at water level;
- Their head is tilted back and mouth is open;
- Their eyes are glassy, empty, or closed;
- They’re not using their legs to try to swim;
- They’re hyperventilating or gasping;
- They’re trying to swim in a particular direction but not making headway;
- They’re trying to roll over onto their back; or
- It looks like they’re trying to climb an invisible ladder.
If you see these signs, ask the person if they’re all right. If they can’t answer, you may only have seconds to help them.

How to Help:

If the unthinkable happens, and you find yourself trying to rescue a drowning person, here’s how best to respond:

- Get the person out of the water immediately, and then check to see if he’s breathing. If not, begin CPR immediately.
- If someone else is present, send them to call for emergency medical help. But don't spend precious moments looking for someone, and don't waste time trying to drain water from the swimmer’s lungs.
- Concentrate instead on rescue breathing and CPR until the person is breathing on his own. Vomiting of swallowed water is very likely during CPR.
- Only when breathing has resumed should you stop and seek emergency help. Call 911. When paramedics arrive, they’ll administer oxygen and continue CPR if necessary.

Finally, don’t let thoughts of drowning keep you from a refreshing swim. Instead, enter the water prepared. Knowing how to prevent and respond to drowning can give you the peace of mind you need to enjoy yourself in and by the water.

For more information on water safety, visit the American Red Cross website, http://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/water-safety