



Office of the Ombudsman for Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities



Water Safety Alert

This Medical Alert is based on the work of the Medical Review Subcommittee and should be posted prominently. The Office of the Ombudsman for Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities works to improve the services provided to people with disabilities by communicating important information found in the Medical Review Subcommittee's reviews of deaths and serious injuries. Thank you for promptly reporting deaths and serious injuries. You are helping us to meet our mission.

Prior to the swimming season providers should make sure that all staff involved in taking clients on water activity outings know and understand the following Water Safety Guidelines from the American Red Cross. Develop a policy regarding water safety and make sure all staff have read and understand the policy. According to Minnesota's DNR, there were 34 (up from 28 in 2009) "non-boating" drownings, 12 boating fatalities, and 73 non-fatal boating accidents in Minnesota in 2010.

The following are safety steps you should take before starting any activity in or near water:

- Learn about swimming, boating, and first aid, and be sure that others in your group also are informed. Contact your local American Red Cross chapter for information about swimming and first aid courses. To learn more about boating and water safety classes, call 1-800-336-BOAT (2628) or the Minnesota DNR's website for a list of boating safety classes: <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/safety/boatwater/education.html>
- Know what to do in case of a water emergency.
- Choose a safe place for water recreation.
- Use Coast Guard-approved life jackets when boating.
- Look for potential water hazards.
- Know local weather conditions and how to find out the weather forecast using local resources or the DNR's website: http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/current_conditions/index.html
- Know how to prevent, recognize, and care for hypothermia.
- Know how to prevent, recognize, and care for heat emergencies.
- Anyone who cannot swim should not use inflatable toys or mattresses or air-filled swimming aids in water above the waist.

Ensure that clients use these basic safety tips whenever they swim in any body of water:

- Never swim alone.
- Swim only in supervised areas.
- Never drink alcohol and swim.
- Enter feet first rather than head first if you do not know the water's depth.
- Swim in a pool only if you can see the bottom at the deepest point.
- Know your swimming limits and stay within them. Don't try to keep up with someone with stronger swimming skills or encourage others to keep up with you.
- Have non-swimmers wear Coast Guard-approved life jackets while in the water.
- Keep an eye on weaker swimmers.
- Watch out for the dangerous "toos" - too tired, too cold, too far from safety, too much sun, too much hard playing.
- Stay out of the water when you are overheated.
- Do not chew gum or eat while you swim; you could easily choke.
- Learn the correct way to dive, and know when it is safe to dive.
- Use common sense about swimming after eating. In general, you do not have to wait an hour after eating before you may safely swim. However, if you have had a large meal, it is wise to let digestion start before beginning strenuous activity like swimming.

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