

Pool & Water Safety

Pools, lakes, ponds, and beaches mean summer fun and cool relief from hot weather. But water also can be dangerous for kids if parents don't take the proper precautions. Nearly 1,000 kids die each year by drowning. And most drownings happen in home swimming pools. It is the second leading cause of accidental death for people between the ages of 5 and 24.

Here are a few ways to keep your kids safe in the water and make sure that they take the right precautions when they're on their own.

Always watch children closely when they're in or near any water. Young children can drown in less than 2 inches (6 centimeters) of water. That means drowning can happen where you'd least expect it.

Take swimming lessons. Kids over 4 years old should learn how to swim correctly (local recreation centers and public pools often have classes taught by qualified instructors). Kids who are younger (but older than age 1) also might benefit from swimming lessons, but check with their doctor first. If you're not a swimmer yourself, it's a good idea for you to take lessons and learn how to swim too.

Don't assume that a child who knows how to swim isn't at risk for drowning. All kids need to be supervised in the water, no matter what their swimming skills. Infants, toddlers, and weak swimmers should always have an adult swimmer within arm's reach to provide "touch supervision." "Swimmies" or other flotation devices are not a substitute for adult supervision.

Invest in proper-fitting, Coast Guard-approved flotation devices (life vests) and have kids wear them whenever near water. Check the weight and size recommendations on the label, then have your child try it on to make sure it fits snugly. For kids younger than 5 years old, choose a vest with a strap between the legs and head support (the collar will keep the child's head up

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and face out of the water). Inflatable vests and arm devices such as water wings are not effective protection against drowning.

Water temperature is important. Enter the water slowly and make sure it feels comfortable for you and your kids. A temperature below 70°F (20°C) is cold to most swimmers. Recommended water temperatures vary depending on the activity and a swimmer's age, as well as for pregnant women. But in general, 82°-86°F (28°-30°C) is comfortable for recreational swimming for children (babies are more comfortable when the water is on the warmer side of this temperature range). Body temperature drops more quickly in water than on land, and it doesn't take long for hypothermia to set in. If a child is shivering or has muscle cramps, get him or her out of the water immediately.

Keep water safety a priority, even after the swim season is over. Pools with covers are not safe; many kids try to walk on top of pools during the winter months and may get trapped underneath a pool cover. In addition, icy pools, ponds, and streams are tempting play areas for kids, so keep your pool gates locked and teach your kids to stay away from water without your supervision. If you have an above-ground pool, it's wise to always lock or remove the ladder when the pool is not in use.

Teach children these tips so they can keep themselves safe while swimming:

- Let kids know that they should contact the lifeguard or an adult immediately if there's an emergency.
- Kids shouldn't run or push around the pool and should never dive in areas that are not marked for diving.
- Teach kids never to swim alone. Using the buddy system means there's always someone looking out for you.
- Teach your child to get out of the water during bad weather, especially

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lightning.

- Make sure your kids understand that swimming in a pool is different from swimming in a lake or the ocean and that there are different hazards for each.

Home Pool Safety

Having a pool, pond, spa, or hot tub at your home requires you to take some additional safety precautions.

Hot tubs may feel great to adults, but kids can become dangerously overheated in them and can even drown, so it's best not to let children use them.

Having a fence (one that goes directly around the pool or spa) between the water and your house is the best safety investment you can make and will help prevent pool-related drownings. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), fences should meet these standards:

- Fences should stand at least 4 feet (130 centimeters) high with no foot or handrails for kids to climb on.
- The slats should be less than 4 inches (110 millimeters) apart so a child can't get through, or if chain link, should have no opening larger than 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches (50 millimeters).
- Gates should be self-closing and self-latching, and the latch should be out of kids' reach.

You can buy other devices, such as pool covers and alarms, but these haven't been proved effective against drowning for very young children, so fencing remains your best measure of protection.

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Lakes and Pond Swimming Safety

Don't let kids swim without adult supervision. Lakes or ponds might be shallow near the bank, but increase in depth sharply farther out from shore.

Ponds and lakes may hide jagged rocks, broken glass, or trash. Make sure kids wear foot protection; even in the water, they should wear aqua socks or water shoes.

Watch out for weeds and grass that could entangle a leg or arm.

Beach Swimming Safety

Teach kids to always swim when and where a lifeguard is on duty. They shouldn't swim close to piers or pilings because sudden water movements may cause swimmers to collide with them.

Unlike the calm waters of a swimming pool, the beach has special dangers like currents and tides. Check with the lifeguard when you arrive to find out about the water conditions.

Don't allow kids to swim in large waves or undertows, and tell them never to stand with their back to the water because a sudden wave can easily knock them over.

Teach kids that if they're caught in a rip current or undertow, they should swim parallel to the shore or should tread water and call for a lifeguard's help.