

Water Safety Factsheet : August 2004

The drowning problem

Drowning is a final and deadly condition. There is little chance for those that get into difficulties on water, especially water that is deep or fast flowing, and cold. Most of those who cannot swim will drown in a few seconds, together with; sadly those that can swim whom also drown close to the bank within a very short period of time of them entering the water.

The number of accidental drowning deaths in the UK has fallen for the third year running from 430 in 2001 to 427 in 2002 with a monthly peak during August when 63 people drowned. There were no major factors during this year such as a significant summer heat wave, severe winter flooding or emergency conditions like the foot and mouth disease restrictions that could have impacted on the level of exposure to water hazards.

Based on a total UK population of 59.2 million, the drowning rate per 100,000 of population is 0.72. The majority of drowning victims were men aged between 15 and 45 years old, for whom the combined total was 151, which comprises 35% of all deaths. For the third year, deaths amongst the under 15's remained static at 40 and of this figure the total of 17 under 5's was again the same as the previous year.

A reduction in those drowning at inland water sites (251) was offset by increases in those drowning at the coast and at home.

87 people drowned either at the coast or in inshore waters and 56 drowned at home either in baths, garden ponds or swimming pools. The number of children drowning at home in baths, in garden ponds and related water features is still in double figures (13) and 42 people, primarily elderly persons died in domestic baths. This is the third year in a row that this figure has risen.

In addition to the accidental drowning deaths, there were a further 41 recorded suicides and 8 cases of homicide.

Young people and drowning – the facts

Drowning is the third most common cause of accidental death among the under 16s. Young people who drown are often victims of their own misjudgement of their swimming ability. They may view a river or lake as a tempting means of cooling off in a hot spell but fail to appreciate the harmful effects that the cold water can have on their stamina and strength.

Although learning to swim may help children who find themselves in difficulties in water, it does not follow that swimming ability makes children safe. Indeed, figures show that more than half of those who drowned could in fact swim.

Deaths among the under 15s remained static at 40. There was also no increase in the number of under fives who drowned in gardens, eight in total, despite the continuing growth in the popularity of garden ponds and water features.

Drownings in the UK 2002 by location			By activities/behaviour	
Rivers, Streams etc.	167	39%	Angling	
Coastal	87	20%	From Land	13
Lakes and Reservoirs	50	12%	From Boat	11
Home Baths	42	9.8%	Total	24
Canals	34	8%		
Docks and Harbours	18	4%	Fell in	80
Swimming Pools	15	4%	Alcohol	73
Garden Ponds	13	3%	Swimming	34
Other	1	0.2%	Boating	22
Total	427		In Vehicles	20
			Sub-aqua	9
			Playing	4
			Canoeing	2
			Cycling	2
Rivers with most drownings				
Thames	42			
Avon	6			
Trent	4			
Don	4			
Ouse	4			
Clyde	3			
Stour	3			

The most important point that emerges from any examination of drowning is that there must be an intervention in the drowning process before the victim gets into difficulties.

A preventative strategy

The most positive way of countering drowning is to prevent entry into the water in the first place. It is essential to counter one of the factors which contributes to drowning as soon as possible, and certainly before the stage of possible rescue is reached. These factors form links on what we refer to as 'The Drowning Chain', i.e. the possible combination of events which lead to drowning.

Any plan to prevent drowning must aim to break one of these links and so avoid the ultimate fate.

The links in the chain are:

- 1. Ignorance, disregard or misjudgement of danger**

An intervention is most successful if it breaks this first link in the drowning chain. Through education comes recognition and therefore avoidance of danger. The danger is then recognised, respected and avoided.

- 2. Unrestricted access to hazards**

The counter to the second link in the drowning chain is to deny access to the hazard. This may be done by warning of danger or by otherwise preventing potential casualties from entering into danger, e.g. fencing.

3. Absence of adequate supervision

Absence of adequate supervision can only be countered by more competent training and application. Those who guard the lives of others can only ever be totally vigilant.

4. Inability to save yourself, or be rescued

If the drowning chain is still intact, and the victim has not been 'saved' while still out of the hazard, only the fourth and final link remains! Now only self rescue, or rescue by another person, can avoid the worst consequences.

Although rescue is a poor option in any preventative plan, this does not mean that it should not be considered and encouraged where appropriate. Other options should have greater priority because they have more chance of success.

Codes of advice

If we are to give advice on the ultimate aim of preventing drowning, this should be based upon the suggestions in the plans for intervention described earlier. RoSPA recognises the need for a water safety code to help everyone especially children, as part of their water safety education. Other codes which give priority to rescue rather than prevention tend to ignore earlier and more effective measures.

SPOT THE DANGERS!

Water may look safe, but it can be dangerous. Learn to spot and keep away from dangers. You may swim well in a warm indoor pool, but that does not mean that you will be able to swim in cold outdoor water.

TAKE SAFETY ADVICE!

Special flags and notices may warn you of danger. Know what the signs mean and do what they tell you.

DON'T GO ALONE!

Children should always go with an adult, not by themselves. An adult can point out dangers or help if somebody gets into trouble.

LEARN HOW TO HELP!

You may be able to help yourself and others if you know what to do in an emergency.