



A Lifeguard's Beach Safety Tips

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Special to the Dispatch

The writer is a 22-year veteran of the Beach patrol. In the off-season, he is an elementary school teacher in Montgomery County. The OCBP consist of over 200 men and women dedicated to ocean rescue and maintaining a safe and orderly environment on Ocean City's beach. The Surf Rescue Technicians guard the beach seven days a week from 10 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.



Lightning

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Lightning is extremely dangerous. And the beach may be one of the worst places to be during a lightning storm. The Beach Patrol's goal is to make beachgoers aware of the dangers of lightning, as well as, how the Ocean City Beach Patrol operates to make the beach safe during a lightning event.

Maybe a few statistics will help illustrate how dangerous lightning is. Florida's Natural History Museum estimates that someone has a one in 79,746 chance of being fatally struck by lightning while the chance of someone being victim to a fatal shark attack is 1 in 3,748,067. That means lightning is nearly 50 times more dangerous than sharks. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) estimates that lightning kills 62 people a year in the U.S. Shark fatalities would average less than one fatality a year in the U.S. In 2012 there have been 3 deaths due to lightning strikes as reported by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Two of these deaths occurred near water. The peak season for lightning has not even begun at this time. Furthermore, hundreds of people are injured every year from lightning strikes. Some of the injuries sustained are life-altering and debilitating. They include memory loss, chronic pain, sleep disorders, numbness, depression, and more.

The Ocean City Beach Patrol has specific procedures it follows when thunder is heard or lightning is spotted. When one of our lifeguards hears thunder they immediately clear all swimmers from the water. The lifeguard then begins warning people about the impending danger of being near the water during an electrical storm. Many scientists believe that if you can hear thunder you are close enough to the storm to be struck. So when you are sitting on the beach and you hear thunder it is time to get off the beach. Once lightning is spotted, the beach is cleared as quickly as possible. At this point our guards are told to take their own safety into account, clear the beach of all patrons, and take cover off the beach as quickly as possible.

Another statistic to consider is that NOAA estimates that 25 percent of fatal lightning strikes happen near water. While another very dangerous place to be during an electrical storm is a wide-open space, such as a sports field, golf course or our favorite place the beach. In the past 35 years there have been 10 cases of individuals being struck by lightning on Ocean City beaches and none in the water (50% were fatal). That is why our guards take the action of getting people off the beach during a storm so seriously. Generally, people can expect to wait 30 minutes after each thunder or visual of lightning before guards will begin allowing people back onto the beach.

The bottom line is that during any type of storm with thunder or lightning, people should stop all activities and take cover indoors. It really is the only safe place. NOAA has promoted a catching slogan that is easy to remember, “When Thunder Roars, Go Indoors!”

Photo by: Kristin Josen:
The OCBP constantly monitors weather events that could affect the ocean city area. Beach Patrol headquarters communicates directly to SRTs (lifeguards) that are deployed along the 10 miles of beach. When threatening weather approaches the area SRTs are able to provide an early warning to their beach patrons requesting them to take cover immediately away from the beach. Once they have finished warning all beach patrons and clearing the beach and water the SRTs take cover off the beach while maintaining a view of their area of responsibility. The picture to the right shows an SRT from the summer of 2011 after returning to his stand once the danger of lightning had past. His stand was actually struck by lightning just shortly after he cleared his beach and had taken cover. The stand was left splintered and charred by the lightning.

