



Ocean City Today – On Guard Safety Tips

by Kristin Joson



The writer has been working with the Beach Patrol for nine years. In the off-season, she is an Instructional Specialist in Charles 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.

The Scan

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Summer is in full swing and the beach is packed with vacationers. Surf rescue technicians (SRTs) look out from their stands at hundreds of people swimming in the water and enjoying themselves on the beach. People often ask, "How can the lifeguards possibly watch everyone?" Although SRTs cannot watch every single person for every single second, they are trained to watch over the beach patrons on their beach in an effective

and efficient way that allows them to see any potential problems before they manifest themselves. Of all the

equipment and skills an SRT brings to the beach each day for work, their ability to scan is the most important. An SRT's scan refers to their ability to visually survey and identify possible problems and to use this information to minimize any threat to beach patrons.

SRTs are trained in the Surf Rescue Academy to seek out non-swimmers before they even enter the water. SRTs are trained to watch the body language and swimming ability of everyone in their water and on their beach. For example, beach patrons who are facing shore or heading towards shore are to be watched more closely. An example of some questions an SRT might ask themselves about a swimmer facing shore are, "Are they having any trouble coming back to the beach? Are they becoming tired and making no progress?" SRTs use a combination of the information they have about the water they guard and the information they gather from the behavior of the people they watch to keep everyone safe.

SRTs are responsible for the entire area around their guard stand including all water and beach area from the stand to their north to the stand to their south including the beach and dune area behind them. This method of constantly looking for any signs of infractions, emergencies or situations needing their attention is an active process and assures that every person is being watched by at least two SRTs at all times. This scan is the SRT's primary tool that enables them to do their job effectively and is one of the most critical skills a guard can develop to help keep everyone safe. It is a proactive tool rather than a reactive response. The SRT's scan is composed of a primary and secondary scan.



Crew Chief Harrison Fisher continually scans his area observing all water and beach activities.

The primary scan includes the entire area from the guard tower to the north (left) of all the water and beach east of the guard stands to the guard tower to the south (right). The secondary scan includes the entire beach and all beach patrons west of the guard stands. Ninety percent of the guard's time is spent in primary scan with a less frequent scan to the west. SRTs are trained to recognize and respond to potential problems before they develop and proactively minimize the danger to their patrons. By maintaining an alert scan, the SRT will be able to warn people away from potential danger (such as a rip current) before the person becomes a victim needing to be rescued and can follow-up by educating the same patrons about the safest places to swim on their beach or potential beach hazards. In fact the scan becomes such a part of the individual lifeguard that many past guards comment that they are unable to relax on any beach without constantly scanning.

Unlike a police officer, firefighter or paramedic, who are dispatched to assist people in need of their services after the 911 center receives a call, the SRT is responsible to determine the need for assistance and then respond appropriately.

Although technology has impacted many areas of public safety, surf lifesaving has seen the least amount of change. When an emergency occurs it is the training and vigilant scan of the SRT that identifies the problem, analyzes the situation and may result in the SRT's decision to use their physical ability to make the proper intervention. Because of these requirements each employee must pass a rigorous pre-employment physical skills test to assure they can meet the running and swimming criteria. Successful candidates attend a Surf Rescue Academy where they learn the various surveillance skills necessary to maintain an active and efficient visual scan.

The SRT is very busy assuring everyone's safety in the water as well as on the beach while at the same time being responsible for enforcing all the laws, ordinances and rules. The job is made easier when they have your patience, understanding and assistance. So please help the SRT out and remember, if you hear a whistle take the time to stop what you are doing and look toward the SRT who is attempting to get someone's attention. It may be you.

The ocean and beach are wonderful places to enjoy a summer day, just remember that the SRT is trying to assure that everyone has a safe and enjoyable experience and may need to remind you about some of the rules. If you need help on the beach or in the water, you should wave your arms over your head indicating to the SRT that you need their assistance. To help keep you safe always check in with the SRT on the stand and remember, "Keep your feet in the sand until the lifeguard's in the stand!"