



A Lifeguard's Beach Safety Tips

by Sgt. Ed Fisher
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.



Never Turn Your Back on the Ocean

Published August 26, 2012

Never turn your back on the ocean. It's a motto all lifeguards live by. It's a motto that we would like all people to live by. There are two reasons to never turn your back on the ocean. Safety and preventing serious injury are the primary reasons. People who turn their backs toward the sea while in the water are in great danger of getting a neck or back injury. Every summer we deal with dozens of serious neck and back injuries, many of which could have been prevented if the person had not turned their back on the ocean. Unsuspecting people who turn their backs to the sea are often taken off guard by a wave and slammed into the sandbar. Sometimes this can be the equivalent to being hit by a car and slammed headfirst into concrete. While it sounds graphic this analogy is truly representational of the force of a wave. On the beach I have seen everything from dislocated shoulders, slipped discs, and spinal cord injuries that caused paralysis. Just being hit in the back or neck by a powerful wave is often enough to cause serious injury. Although we all are aware of the dangers of being rear-ended in a car accident and the possibility of a whiplash type neck injury, most people do not realize that being hit in the back by a wave that can carry several tons of water is the equivalent of a 25 mile per hour or greater rear-end collision. If everyone would pay attention and not turn their backs on the waves the Beach Patrol would respond to a lot less neck and back trauma. There aren't too many days that go by where a lifeguard does not see someone with there back to the waves get walloped unsuspectingly. The beach patrol encourages people to pay attention when standing in the surf or walking out of the surf. These are two times when people seem to take their guard down and turn their back on the ocean.

The other reason to not turn your back on the ocean is respect. A famous Hawaiian, Duke Kahanamoku, helped popularize the motto, "Never turn your back on the ocean." Duke was a native Hawaiian who gained fame by helping make surfing an international sport and winning gold medals at the Olympics in 1912 and 1920. He also won a silver in the 1924 Olympics. Duke was a lifeguard and recognized the value of never turning your back on the ocean, but he also tried to teach people the same respect he and his Hawaiian ancestors had for the ocean.



Captain's Note: The Ocean City Beach Patrol has worked with trauma doctors to modify and adapt a specialized technique of spinal stabilization that was first introduced by Hawaiian lifeguards to manage suspected head, neck and back injuries. Although every surf rescue technician is trained and skilled in the use of these techniques it is far better for our beach patrons to have injuries prevented rather than treated. Taking responsibility for your own actions and spreading the caution about spinal

cord injuries is the greatest form of prevention we have. Many people just do not realize the awesome energy and power contained in a wave and that wet sand is just as unyielding as concrete and that it is the bones of the spinal column that cause the damage and possible paralysis that results from the impact of your head, neck or back with the beach. Most people would never think of crossing the street without looking both ways, but will turn their back to these powerful waves which could be just as dangerous to an unsuspecting person. Please, use your head to protect your spine and think before turning your back on the ocean, diving or riding breaking waves into the beach. Have fun but remain safe!



Photo by Kristin Josen: Beach Patrol trains and updates all personnel in many life saving techniques each season. Because of the potential seriousness of this type of injury SRTs are constantly practicing and perfecting their skills at performing the spinal cord stabilization technique. In this picture one of our own SRTs is in the role of the victim while other SRTs perform the technique and in this case includes treatment by paramedics.