



A Lifeguard's Beach Safety Tips

by Sgt. Ed Fisher
Special to the Dispatch

The writer is a 17-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 Sure Rescue Technicians guard the beach seven days a week from 10 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.



Water Awareness Equals Accident Prevention

Aug 15, 2008 The Dispatch/Maryland Coast Dispatch

August not only brings hot humid temperatures but the ocean typically gets rougher as tropical storm activity is more prevalent in the Atlantic Basin pushing larger more frequent waves onto our beaches. Rip currents, shore break, and what some might refer to as “great body boarding waves” all can pose dangerous situations for swimmers. People who are unaware of the ocean’s power and swiftly changing movements can suddenly find themselves in trouble without realizing it. Swimmers who over estimate their abilities while under estimating the power of the ocean and its waves and currents, may be in for an unpleasant life altering experience. The crushing power of a ton of water in the form of a wave can cause serious or fatal bone and joint injuries. The Beach Patrol recommends that you ask the SRT on duty about the current water conditions for the day. They will inform you of any potential hazards that you should be aware of. However if an unfortunate accident should happen, SRTs are well prepared to handle any emergency.

Although broken ankles, dislocated shoulders, concussions, and cracked ribs are not uncommon injuries at the beach, the most serious of these involve head, neck and back injuries. Most people are aware that on land it is always best not to move a person who may have a back injury. However, in the ocean the movement of the waves makes leaving the victim in the surf, to possibly sustain more injuries, not an option. Putting victims on backboards while in the surf can actually cause more damage. Beach Patrol guards are taught how to effectively and carefully extract victims from the surf who are suspected to have serious spinal injuries. Guards work as a team to carry a victim to safety while minimizing movement to the head, neck, and back. The Beach Patrol developed and modified a technique of removing victims with suspected neck or back injuries out of deep and or shallow water. The technique has been refined over many years of training and usage from its introduction as a technique developed in Hawaii. The modified technique is unique to the OCBP but has developed with input from the medical community and emergency providers. It has been approved by MIEMS as a state standard with the Ocean City Beach Patrol as the only organization that is certified to teach other first responders and organizations in this victim removal technique.

Being aware of the dangers that could occur in the ocean is the first step to prevention. Diving or doing flips in shallow water as well as riding waves that are breaking on the beach could lead to serious injuries, paralysis, or death. Never underestimate the power of the ocean, keep yourself and your loved ones safe by always checking with the SRT on duty about daily surf conditions at your beach! SRTs are more than happy to answer any questions that beach goers may have.

Captain's Note:

The most common culprit of neck injuries results from swimmers that are body surfing or body boarding incorrectly or in unsafe conditions. The proper technique for riding a wave is get in front of the wave so it is pushing you out in front and finish your ride before running out of water. Body boarding on the top of a breaking wave may cause you to be propelled to the ocean floor (we call this going over the falls). To prevent this, stay on the rear half of the board and if you need to bailout, go off the back of the board. The proper way to body surf a wave is to have your hands out in front of your body; this allows for more control of movement in the water. The most dangerous condition exists when we are experiencing shore break. Shore break occurs when waves rather than breaking on the sandbar continue to build and crash with full force on the shore with little or no water depth. When unsuspecting victims find themselves on a breaking wave and they are being thrown into shallow water they have set themselves up for a tragedy. NEVER ride a wave during shore break conditions or play in the impact zone!

Although education and prevention are the primary focus of the Beach Patrol mission, SRTs (lifeguards) are well trained and prepared to handle severe neck and back injuries (although we prefer preventing injuries before they occur). Our Beach Patrol developed and modified a technique of removing victims with suspected neck or back injuries out of deep and or shallow water. The technique has been refined over many years of training and usage from its introduction as a technique developed in Hawaii. The modified technique is unique to our agency but has developed with input from the medical community and emergency providers. It has been approved by MIEMS as a state standard with the Ocean City Beach Patrol as the only organization that is certified to teach other first responders and organizations in this technique.

On land it is always best not to move a person who may have a back injury. In the ocean the movement of the waves makes leaving the victim in the surf to possibly sustain more injuries impossible. Using backboards in the surf zone can actually cause more damage to a victim. Beach Patrol guards are taught how to effectively and carefully extract a victims from the surf who are suspected to have serious spinal injuries. Guards work as a team to carry a victim to safety while minimizing movement to the head, neck, and back. Never underestimate the power of the ocean, keep yourself and your loved ones safe by always checking with the SRT on duty about daily surf conditions at your beach!