



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.



Holes on the Beach

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Many lifeguards' least favorite policy to enforce is our policy regarding holes on the beach. We often have to go up to a couple youngsters that are having a great time digging away, and tell them they need to fill in a hole. I think the vibe from beach patrons is evident. They are all thinking why is that lifeguard picking on these poor kids that are just playing, having fun, and burying their cousin neck deep in the sand. In fact we are trying to address a problem that is not all that uncommon. We are trying to prevent a sand-hole collapse.

In Ocean City there has been one fatality in the past 10 years due to a sand-hole collapse, and another very close call that involved a young child having to be revived after a sand-hole collapse.

In fact, nationally, there are more sand-hole collapse fatalities than shark attack fatalities. From 1990 to 2006 there were 16 fatal sand-hole collapses and 12 fatal shark attacks. Lifeguards are presented with a danger we can prevent, so we are going to continue to enforce our knee-deep policy.

Our guards try to address the hole issue by keeping holes less than knee deep. That doesn't mean Shaquille O'Neal's knee either. We are talking about a short person's knees.

We're busy trying to watch swimmers, so the best thing is to stop people from getting to the point where holes are a danger. So if we see a hole that is knee deep we are going to ask that it not be dug any deeper. If a guard spots a deep hole they are trained to fill it in right away. You can help us prevent sand-hole accidents by leaving the excavation equipment at home.



Captain's Note: Ocean City Beach Patrol members are constantly on the lookout for potential dangers on the beach and in the ocean, and will intervene when a dangerous situation occurs. A serious danger well known to the Surf Rescue Technicians is the potential for a suffocation emergency following a sand cave in.

In recent years this serious danger has been widely documented throughout the world and was even featured in the New England Journal of Medicine this past spring. Victims typically become completely buried in the sand when the walls of the hole unexpectedly collapse, leaving virtually no evidence of the hole or the location of the victim. Parents are often concerned about lesser dangers such as sea life in the ocean but are often unaware of the possibility of a potentially deadly situation on dry land when digging a hole in the sand. SRTs are trained to look out for dangerous situations.

Informing beach patrons of the dangers of digging holes on the beach to prevent a possible tragedy is our way of being proactive instead of waiting for a collapse to occur and then having to react when seconds count. Because of the hole collapse tragedies that have occurred in the past, the Beach Patrol lifeguards are on constant surveillance and will get down from their stand to educate and monitor the people digging holes. The basic problem is that the sand is both heavy and unstable and when a collapse occurs, rescue attempts are hindered because as sand is being removed to free the victim the hole will continue to collapse in on itself making a successful rescue very difficult.

That is why the lifeguards remain vigilant and continue to be proactive about digging holes, preventing accidents before they happen. Because hole collapses are so deadly, the Beach Patrol recently dedicated a day with CBS news, attempting to educate the public about digging holes. Susan Koeppen, consumer correspondent from the CBS Early Show came to Ocean City and actually got buried in a sand hole, under the careful watch of the Beach Patrol, to get first hand knowledge of what it feels like. To view this extremely informative segment on the dangers of digging holes in the sand on the beach, you can visit our website at www.ococean.com/ocbp. Click on the News button and follow the link to the CBS Early Show. Besides the potential for suffocation, holes create a potential danger for those people responsible to maintain and patrol the beach throughout the night. Remember, if you dig it, fill it.



Sgt. Ed Fisher explains the dangers of digging holes and helps the beach patrons fill the hole in.