



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.



No Alcohol Allowed on the Beach

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Alcohol is not allowed on the beach in Ocean City, Maryland. Not only is it unlawful, but also it is very dangerous. Our lifeguards are required to enforce the city ordinances. If people comply with present us with any resistance we immediately contact the Ocean City Police Department to deal with the situation. Failure to obey the ordinance results in a hefty citation that is sure to rain on any sunny beach party. The ordinance is posted at every street head in Ocean City and on the back of every lifeguard stand. Furthermore, lifeguards are constantly enforcing this ordinance. It amazes me that drinking still occurs on the beaches of Ocean City. I have to say though there is some irony of a 40-year-old beach patron hiding his beer from an 18-year-old lifeguard. The fact is though our guards see you hiding it, and are going to ask you to take it off the beach.

Not only is drinking unlawful on the beach, but there are a number of safety issues that come up due to drinking at the beach. We deal with numbers of heat related illnesses on the beach that are alcohol related. The fact is alcohol dehydrates you, and having only a beer or two on a hot day can cause symptoms of heat exhaustion. Furthermore, swimming in the ocean after consuming alcohol is very dangerous. Salt water and alcohol is about the worst cocktail, and we rescue numerous people every summer that probably would not have gotten into trouble if they were not drinking. We can usually tell when someone has been drinking when we rescue him or her. On the open ocean alcohol is very easy to smell on someone's breath. I tell all my guards that if they rescue someone that has been drinking that they should ask the person to leave the beach.

Consuming too much alcohol before coming to the beach or while at the beach has also been responsible for very serious incidents. We have had near drowning and serious neck and back injuries that have been caused by impaired judgment due to alcohol consumption.

The Ocean City Beach Patrol is asking you to follow the laws of Ocean City and make your beach trip much safer.



Captain's Note: There are many reasons why you should not drink alcohol on the beach. The major reason is because it is illegal! That is right it is against the law to consume alcohol on the beaches of Ocean City, Maryland and could lead to your arrest and removal from the beach. The law is specific about the consumption of alcohol and has nothing to do with the container it is in (except that glass is also prohibited) although many people wrongly believe that pouring it in a cup makes it acceptable, which is not true. Most beach patrons know the law, but choose to disobey and take their alcohol to

the beach and then attempt to hide the behavior from the Beach Patrol. This just isn't fair to the Surf Rescue Technician (lifeguard) on duty who is responsible to monitor and enforce all activities on the beach as well as in the water. To some it appears as a game, to see if they can conceal their illegal activity from the Beach Patrol while the SRT attempts to perform their job and enforce all of Ocean City laws and ordinances. The result is that your SRT has to divide their responsibilities between protecting people in the water and pleading with "Adults" to follow the rules.

From a safety perspective "alcohol and water don't mix". Many of our more serious incidents over the years have involved intoxicated beach patrons that do things after drinking that they would never do if sober. The sad fact is, that many lives have been altered or affected in a permanent way by alcohol related incidents or injuries. Not only is the life of the victim of a paralyzing injury affected, but so is the rest of that persons family who are often left caring for that individual following the injury. Another, issue with intoxicated "swimmers" is that reaction time and physical ability are diminished and often lead to the person finding themselves in trouble in the water and in need of help. If this occurs between the hours of 10:00 AM and 5:30 PM they will be lucky enough to be rescued by an SRT, although following the rescue these individuals do not do very well and are often transported to a medical facility for further evaluation (we had several this summer). However, when an intoxicated individual decides to take a moonlight swim after the bars close the outcome is far too often tragic and ends with a body recovery and a call to the family of the deceased. The final and more common issue with drinking on the beach is an increase risk of heat related illness (the majority of the hundreds of heat related incidents on the beach are alcohol related). Alcohol increases the loss of body fluids and accelerates dehydration and leads to heat exhaustion and if untreated may result in heat stroke which is almost always fatal.

An entirely different issue is the preservation of a family atmosphere on the beaches of Ocean City. Almost 100% of the loud, obnoxious and disorderly people the Beach Patrol deals with in a summer are obviously under the influence of alcohol. This is why the Beach Patrol and your SRT work so hard to enforce the laws and ordinances of the Town of Ocean City. But we need your help! Please do your part and obey the laws and listen to the SRT and keep the alcohol off the beach. Drink responsibly but drink where it is legal. And always remember "Keep your feet in the sand until the lifeguard's in the stand!"



This picture shows two Surf Rescue Technicians (lifeguards) tending to an intoxicated man who was just pulled from the ocean. A third SRT (not pictured) is in the stand is covering for the "lifeguard" who rescued the "drunk" man. Area Sgt. Weingard is on the scene to help handle the situation. Drinking and swimming are not only dangerous to the intoxicated individuals but also absorb necessary resources. To help prevent these situations the Beach Patrol actively enforces laws and ordinances on the beach. You may see them on foot and stopping to inform beach patrons that alcohol consumption on the beach is illegal and dangerous.