



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.



No Alcohol Allowed on the Beach

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Alcohol is not allowed on the beach in Ocean City, Maryland. Our lifeguards are required to enforce the city ordinance that makes it unlawful to have an open container anywhere in Ocean City including the beach. If people do not comply with us or present us with any resistance we immediately contact the Ocean City Police Department. This infraction has been recently (June 2012) reclassified as a CRIMINAL offense and may lead to the arrest of the individuals involved and 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, so really there is no excuse for not knowing the law. Furthermore, lifeguards are constantly enforcing this ordinance. And as with any law it is the citizens' responsibility to know the local laws.

It amazes me that drinking still occurs on the beaches of Ocean City. I have to say though there is some irony to a 40-year-old beach patron hiding his beer from an 18-year-old lifeguard. The fact is our guards do 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 increases the 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.

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 Center for Disease Control reports that alcohol was involved with 25-50% of adult and adolescent deaths that occurred during water recreation. And alcohol is involved with nearly half of all drownings among adolescent boys.

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: In addition to Maryland's Underage Drinking laws, Ocean City has its own laws and ordinances. Those that relate to alcohol are:

- Public Consumption of Alcohol has been reclassified (2012) as a Criminal offense and may lead to your arrest.
- Consuming alcohol in public by ANYONE is prohibited
- Carrying an open container of alcohol is a violation. This includes the beach areas, sidewalks and the Boardwalk.
- Using false identification is a criminal offense that can result in a fine and/or loss of license. Plain clothes police officers will enforce this law.

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. 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!"

Photo by Kristin Joson: As part of an SRTs responsibilities they are required to monitor and enforce all OC ordinances and state laws. In this case SRT Billy Eckert is jogging among the beach population looking for any infractions and explaining the laws to anyone not in compliance.

