



A Lifeguard's Beach Safety Tips

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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.



The Hazards of Rip Currents

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The Ocean City Beach Patrol has been actively trying to educate people about the hazards of rip currents much longer than the 21 years I have been on the patrol. Our lifeguards talk to people several times each day and do beach safety seminars explaining rip currents and their dangers to beach patrons. Every one of our lifeguard chairs has a diagram and explanation of rip currents, and we periodically hand out pamphlets about rip currents. Furthermore, we work with the local community, schools and businesses to try to get the word out. In addition, the Ocean City Beach Patrol has been actively involved with the National Weather Service (NWS), and provides updated rip current data several times each day to the NWS. With the data the beach patrol provides, the NWS is able to provide rip current forecasts and daily advisories for the public.

The beach patrol has used an array of other methods to try to educate the public about rip currents. For example, there is often information on the Ocean City Convention Center's electronic billboard, as well as, Sea Board (sign boat). The NWS has also beefed up its public information. On their website you can access public service announcements in English and Spanish, and also listen to podcasts about rip currents.

Rip currents are relatively small-scale surf-zone currents moving away from the beach. Rip currents form as waves disperse along the beach causing water to become trapped between the beach and a sandbar or other underwater feature. Water converges into a narrow, river-like channel moving away from the shore at high speed. Currents are without question the biggest hazard present on the beach. NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) estimates that on a national level, at least 80 percent of surf rescues are due to rip currents. In Ocean City that number could easily be estimated to be closer to 95 percent. It is also estimated that in the United States, nearly 100 people a year drown due to rip currents. This would place rip currents ahead of most weather-related hazard fatalities (third leading cause of weather-related death) such as lightning and tornados. Only heat and flooding would be responsible for more deaths yearly.

Although the beach patrol performs between 2,000 – 4,000 rescues (Surf Rescue Technician enters the water and assists a person to safety) each year, most of these are minor and in many more cases the surf rescue technician simply uses their whistle and flags to direct the swimmer out of the rip current without incident. Beach patrons should always consult with the surf rescue technician about ocean conditions including rip current activity and the best place to swim. If you start to feel the effects of a rip current, do not panic, and to escape the pull of the rip current you should always swim parallel to shore and not try to fight the current. Once you no longer feel the pull you should swim back into shore (rip currents do not pull you under). People often make the mistake of swimming straight in against the current, getting tired and then beginning to panic. If you

ever find yourself in an uncomfortable situation in the ocean, just wave your arms, and the surf rescue technician will assist you to safety. However, when people ignore our plea to never enter the ocean when the beach patrol is off-duty, they are making a potentially deadly mistake. The beach patrol is on duty daily in the summer from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

To get current information about the beach patrol as well as daily stats and current beach conditions, you can follow the beach patrol on Twitter or “like us” on the official OCBP Facebook page. We can’t wait to be a part of your wonderful experiences in Ocean City, because we are glad you are here, and always remember to “Keep your feet in the sand until the lifeguard’s in the stand!”



Captain’s Note: Your Surf Rescue Technician will call everyone out of the ocean (5:25 PM) before they leave the beach at 5:30 PM so that it is clear that the beach is now “unguarded”. Therefore we can be assured that those who enter the water during unguarded hours are taking that risk knowingly. The risk is great, although many of the 2,000 – 4,000 people who we rescue during guarding hours tell us that they never intended to go out that “far”, they do not make the connection to the fact that rip currents (the 3rd leading cause of weather related deaths nationally) will actually pull a person from waist deep water to water that is over their head quickly and without warning. These same currents that are the cause of 95% of all rescues we make during the day are also present before and after we are on our stands. The only difference is that when a person finds themselves in trouble before 10:00 AM or after 5:30 PM.. there is no one to save their life and unfortunately it all too often has ended in tragedy. We continue our efforts to educate the public, warning them of the dangers of swimming on unguarded beaches, and that we make sure people leave the ocean before we pull our lifeguard stands back and cross over the dune for the night. If you find yourself in one of these deadly currents just remember the acronym R.I.P. R = Relax and do not panic, I = I need help and wave for assistance, P = Swim Parallel to escape the pull of the Rip Current and then swim back to the safety of the beach.