



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.



Rip Currents

July 2008 The Dispatch/Maryland Coast Dispatch

Rip currents have been getting national media attention over the past few days. Three drowning deaths in New Jersey and beach patrols up and down the eastern seaboard reporting high numbers of rescues has gotten the media's attention. The Ocean City Beach Patrol has had over 1500 rescues over the past week. The fact is the Ocean City Beach Patrol has been actively trying to educate people of the hazards for rip currents much longer than the 17 years I have been on the patrol. Daily our lifeguards talk to people 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.

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. The 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. The NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) estimates that at least 80% of surf rescues are due to rip currents. I would say that number could easily be estimated at 95%. It is also estimated that nearly 100 people a year drown due to rip currents. This would place rip currents ahead of most weather related hazard fatalities (3rd leading cause of weather related death) such as lightning and tornados. Only heat and flooding would be responsible for more deaths yearly.

To escape from a rip current one should always swim parallel to shore and not try to fight the current. People often make the mistake of swimming straight in against the current getting tired, and then beginning to panic. Beach Patrons should also always consult with a lifeguard about rip current activity and the best place to swim. And remember, Keep your feet in the sand until the lifeguard is in the stand.”

Captains Note: Rip currents are by far the greatest threat at any beach and education the general public is our best defense against this deadly hazard. The rip current threat is always present and that is why the Beach Patrol goes to great lengths to warn anyone who wishes to enjoy the ocean to only do so when the Surf Rescue Technicians are on duty. There are far too many tragic stories of people losing their lives to rip currents when they only intended to take a “quick evening dip”. Had they waited until the Beach Patrol returned to duty the next day, many less lives would have been impacted by their decision. A particularly tragic scenario has repeated itself 3 times in recent years when parents have allowed children to swim while lifeguards were off duty.

In every case a parent drowned while attempting to save one of their children who had been caught in a rip current with one case also resulting in the loss of a child.

Another contributing factor is the persons swimming ability. In a neighborhood pool, if you cannot swim well you can walk down the steps and remain in 3 feet of water at the shallow end until you choose to walk back out of the pool. However, in the ocean, the bottom is uneven and there are waves and current. The result is, that a poor swimmer may be pulled to deep water or picked up by a passing wave and deposited into a deeper hole, each with the potential result of creating a sudden drowning situation. If the Beach Patrol is not on duty the situation is dyer and a call to 911 takes to long when seconds count. For this reason, only swim when the SRT is on duty, check with the SRT before swimming and never go beyond your own swimming ability. Because rip currents are so deadly, the Beach Patrol recently dedicated two days with NBC news attempting to educate the public about rip currents. Carrie Cavanaugh from Channel 11 news came to Ocean City and actually got in a rip, under the careful watch of the Beach Patrol, to get first hand knowledge of what it feels like. They had cameramen in and out of the water and a helicopter filming from overhead. To view this segment on rip currents with excellent graphic images you can visit our website at www.ococean.com/ocbp. Click on the News button and follow the link to Channel 11 news.