



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.



Studying the waves helps safety

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Recently a kite surfer tried surfing in a hurricane and ended up getting blown into the side of a building. An accident like this does not happen because of bad luck. An accident like this happens because of poor decision making, not knowing your sport, and not respecting the elements. I mean is it really surprising that a kite that was flying in a hurricane got out of control? The idea here is that everyone entering the surf should have more common sense than this and take some basic precautions.

The first precaution begins on the beach. People should spend at least 15 minutes on the beach surveying the conditions. Often people come out to the beach and see a calm ocean. As soon as they attempt to swim they find themselves confronted with a dangerous set of waves or strong currents they were not aware of. Be sure to know what the conditions are before entering the water. The daily conditions of the ocean are governed by the swell direction, wind velocity, and ocean bottom. It is a very good idea to make sure you discuss the conditions with the lifeguard on duty as well.

Once you have sufficiently surveyed the scene and you feel it is safe, you may enter the water. Remember, however, what is safe for one person is not necessarily safe for everyone. Know your own ability and ocean knowledge. If you are in doubt of the conditions, do not go in the water. But if you're sure it's safe and decide to venture out into the waves, take your time and study the waves once you're out there. Even our most experienced surfers should spend time studying the swell to give them a better understanding of the waves. Each day is different and it is important to know the speed, steepness, and strength of the waves that are coming in before attempting a take off (begin surfing a wave).

I have been fortunate enough to surf in some pretty cool places such as Hawaii, Costa Rica, and most recently Portugal. Something dawned on me while I was there getting ready to surf. As excited as I was to surf I took quite a few precautions before I hit the waves. I have 17 years experience as a beach lifeguard and surfer and I still did not hit the surf without making sure everything was safe. I think everyone should take precautions before attempting to surf, bodyboard, swim, or do whatever it is you're going to do in the waves. I spent the time surveying the waves. I then got as much information about the local beach conditions as I could from the lifeguard. Only then did I feel it was safe to go out.



Captains Note: Beach Patrons should check in with the lifeguards about current beach conditions, especially at this time of the year when we are in a reduced coverage scheme. Our guards are friendly, knowledgeable, hard working and happy to answer any questions that you may have. You should know that every member of the Peach Patrol

is fully tested and certified before they ever have the privilege of guarding you or your loved ones. In fact the bottom line that determines if I offer them a job is a positive response to the question “Would I trust them to guard someone in my family?” However, even with the most highly qualified and expertly trained lifeguards on the stands, we still need your help. If you are not a highly skilled swimmer with ocean experience, remain close to shore. It takes even the fastest runner and swimmer some time to get to you and the further out you are in trouble, the more time it takes for us to help you. Never rely on an artificial flotation device in place of actual swimming ability. These devices just give swimmers a false sense of security, because in the surf that flotation could be lost and suddenly make the user an actively drowning victim. The ocean and beach are wonderful places to enjoy a summer day, just remember that the ocean is not the same as a neighborhood pool. Our first priority is to keep all beach patrons safe, but we cannot control the ocean. When hazards exist where people are swimming, it is our job to guide them out of harms way or when necessary to swim out and assist them back to safety. Our job is made easier when we have their patience, understanding and assistance.

Remember, if you hear a whistle take the time to stop what you are doing and look toward the SRT who is attempting to get someone’s attention. It may be you and if you need help, you should wave your arms over your head indicating to the SRT (lifeguard) that you need their assistance. To help us keep you safe always check in with the Surf Rescue Technician (Lifeguard) on the stand and never go in the ocean if the Beach Patrol is not on duty.

Photo by Kristin Josen/OCBP
Before going out a wise surfer spends some time looking over the situation

