



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.



Lightning is Extremely Dangerous on the Beach

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Lightning is an extremely dangerous hazard we deal with quite often in Ocean City. My goal is to make beachgoers aware of the dangers of lightning, and how the Ocean City Beach Patrol works to make the beach safe during a lightning event.

Maybe a few statistics will be the best way to hit home the idea of how dangerous lightning is. Florida's Natural History Museum estimate that someone has a 1 in 79,746 chance of being fatally struck by lightning while the chance of someone being victim to a fatal shark attack is 1 in 3,748,067. That means lightning is nearly fifty times more dangerous than sharks. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) estimates that lightning kills 62 people a year in the United States. Shark fatalities would average less than one fatality a year in the U.S. After considering this it sounds like lightning is even scarier than Jaws.

When one of our lifeguards hears thunder they immediately clear the water, and begin warning people about the impending danger of being near the water during an electrical storm. Many scientists believe that if you can hear thunder you are close enough to the storm to be struck. So when you are sitting on the beach and you hear thunder it is time to get out of lay-back vacation mode and high-tail it off the beach. Once lightning is spotted the beach is cleared as quickly as possible. At this point our guards are told to take their own safety into account, clear the beach, and take cover off the beach as quickly as possible. Another statistic to consider is that NOAA estimates that 25% of fatal lightning strikes happen near water. That is why our guards take the action of getting people off the beach during a storm so seriously. Generally, people can expect to wait 20 minutes after each thunder or visual of lightning before guards will begin allowing people back onto the beach.



Captains Note: In my years with the OCBP I have been involved with 10 lightening incidents. All occurred on the beach and none in the water. In one instance a group from Northern VA. was on the beach at North Division Street as a storm approached. The Beach Patrol cleared the beach as standard procedure. However, this particular group refused to leave and huddled under an umbrella. A single bolt of lightening struck the umbrella. Instantly, all 4 individuals were left unconscious and fighting for their lives.

Although, Beach Patrol personnel responded risking their own safety and performed CPR, all victims died.

Even with this knowledge and the fact that a beach is one of the most dangerous places to be during a lightening event, people still argue with the SRTs (lifeguards) attempting to do their job and keep the patrons safe. I have personally spoken with a

father on the beach as he held a small child in his arms, with active lightening all around as he argued about leaving the beach. As you can imagine it becomes even harder to clear the beach if it doesn't look threatening. However, Beach Patrol Headquarters constantly monitors weather events that could affect the Ocean City area. Beach Patrol headquarters communicates directly to SRTs that are deployed along 10.5 miles of beach. When threatening weather approaches the area SRTs are able to provide an early warning to their beach patrons requesting them to take cover immediately away from the beach. Once they have finished warning all beach patrons and clearing the beach and water the SRTs take cover off the beach while maintaining a view of their area of responsibility.

Don't risk your life, the life of your family or the safety of our Surf Rescue Technicians. When asked to leave the beach, do so immediately.



The OCBP constantly monitors weather events that could affect the Ocean City area. When threatening weather approaches, the OCBP provides an early warning to its beach patrons requesting them to take cover immediately away from the beach. Above, a surf rescue technician warns beach patrons of the danger of lightning and is encouraging them to quickly leave the area and take shelter.