



Ocean City Today – On Guard Safety Tips

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The Rule About Digging at the Beach

Published June 15, 2012

If you're heading to the beach, there's a danger you should know about. It's not jellyfish or sharks; in fact it is not even water related -- it's the sand. Digging holes in the sand can be a serious hazard for you and your family. Lots of people dig holes in the sand, but they don't know their holes can quickly cave in and trap those inside. The rule is simple and straightforward: you can dig holes on the beach as long as they only take up a small area and are no deeper than the knees of the smallest person in the group. There is absolutely no tunneling allowed.

Sand hole cave-ins happen on beaches all over the world and this includes Ocean City. Just last summer it happened on a beach that I was on. The lifeguard told two kids that they couldn't dig tunnels and they had to cover them up. They did, however, one tunnel only partially got filled in and a baby crawled in the hole and it caved in. Luckily it wasn't that deep and the parent extracted the child before it was a life-threatening emergency.

Three summers ago in Ocean City, an 11-year-old boy attempted to dig a tunnel between two holes. The tunnel collapsed and he was buried alive, headfirst, with only his feet exposed. There was nothing he could do to save himself. The more he struggled the tighter packed the sand around him became. Lucky for him a girl noticed the trouble and alerted a family member who began efforts to free the child from the sand that not only was trapping him but also taking his life. As several minutes passed, the situation became frenzied when the mom screamed for help. The scream of terror brought several nearby beach patrons to assist with unearthing the trapped child, however, these efforts were making little progress and in actuality were making the situation worse, which is usually the case with a bystander response. As the first lifeguards arrived on the scene they immediately went to work and with a more organized effort were able to recover the lifeless body of the boy. (This is a skill that surf rescue technicians (SRTs) are trained in and practice each season for emergencies such as these.) They performed CPR and this story had a happy ending.

Unfortunately this type of preventable accident continues to occur on beaches around the world. This past March in the UK a 32 year old man had been enjoying a day on the beach with his wife, friends and family. He had been helping to dig a hole, for fun, when the sand engulfed him. He was trapped, with a foot of sand above his head. His brother and best friend began a frantic search for the buried man, assisted by passers-by. They were later joined by around fifty members of the emergency services, who had to remove tons of sand in order to bring him out alive.

For some hole diggers, the story can have a deadly ending. We try to tell people about the dangers of digging holes in the sand before their, often-intricate, pit digging plans get

too far underway. There is something about a day at the beach that makes people want to dig and most people don't realize the dangers. Digging a shallow hole to lie down in and get covered up for a picture is funny and safe. But anything deeper than the knee is not. Out on the beach digging holes has become just another part of the vacation like looking for sand crabs or eating fries on the boardwalk. Our SRTs always do their best to monitor the different situations on their beaches, but on a day when the water is busy and the beach is crowded with umbrellas, diggers can make dangerous amounts of progress in the sand before they are asked to fill in their holes.

SRTs are often asked by hole diggers why deep holes are not allowed. Let us review the facts. Deep holes are dangerous just about anywhere they are found and people usually try to avoid falling into them. Sand holes are particularly dangerous because they can collapse on the people digging them. Also, the vacation-oriented mindset of hole diggers clouds judgment and people tend to underestimate the possible dangers of jumping in and out of a giant sandpit. Many times people want to get their picture taken in the hole that they dug not realizing that at any given moment the sand can cave in around them. Once a person is buried in the sand it is very difficult if not impossible to dig them out and have a positive outcome. Sand shifts back into place even as people try to move the sand off of a trapped victim. Interviewing several people that attempted to help the 11-year-old boy referred to in the above Ocean City emergency confirmed that this was exactly what was happening to them. As they feverishly attempted to remove the sand that was trapping the boy, more sand just as quickly took its place. One might be amazed that it would take 40 people 30 minutes to free a buried victim. Just as a person can drown in a small amount of water it does not take a very deep hole to trap a child and once trapped due to the nature and instability of sand holes a person could perish before being freed. Hence the rule that the hole may only be as deep as the knee of the smallest person in the group of people digging the hole.

To those people who think that people being buried alive under the sand is an old wives tale that lifeguards use to scare people into obeying a rule, I would refer you to the startling statistics that report that more than several dozen young people have been killed over the last decade on beaches in the United States when their hole or sand tunnel collapsed on them. Harvard researcher, Bradley Maron, who has been tracking sand hole collapses worldwide for the past decade says that 60 percent have been fatal.

When you look at sand hole collapses worldwide the number dramatically increases and if you look at entrapments that do not end in the death of the trapped individual, the statistics would report hundreds each year.

Interestingly, people always ask about sharks, which have never been a problem in Ocean City, however, national statistics comparing sand hole collapses to shark attacks confirms that you are far more likely to experience a sand hole collapse than a shark attack. (A person has a 1 in 3,748,067 chance of a shark attack fatality). So instead of asking every lifeguard how many shark attacks there were this year, people should ask, how many sand hole collapses occurred.

It is unbelievable that a vacation could end so tragically, but it does happen. Use your common sense and keep your hole digging to a safe depth or try a new, less work-intensive vacation tradition such as building a sandcastle, hunting for shells, reading a

book in the shade or enjoying a rare midday nap. If you do dig a hole, never leave it unattended and make sure that you fill it in before you leave for the day.

The Ocean City beach has one of the cleanest, finest sand you will find anywhere. Enjoy it, but please do so in a safe manner. One thing that you can always do to remain safe is limit beach activity to a time when lifeguards are on duty. If any of the above near tragic situations had occurred when lifeguards were not on duty, there is no doubt the victims would not have survived. Because of the worldwide impact of sand hole collapses, OCBP has contributed to several national news features to educate the public about the dangers of sand holes. To view these from our website log on to www.ococean.com/ocbp and click on the SAFETY button. Remember to always keep your feet in the sand until the lifeguard's in the stand; it could save a life, yours!

One Saturday in June a large group of young adults dug a large sand hole, lined it with plastic and filled it with water. They used it as part of a tug of war activity with one team attempting to pull the other team into the water filled pit. Upon discovering it, the Beach Patrol explained the knee-deep rule and remained with the group until the hole was safely filled in.

