



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.



Umbrellas

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A hazard many beach patrons are unaware of is windswept umbrellas. Umbrellas swept by wind gusts often barrel down the beach at speeds of 20 mph and more. High winds and gusts are common on the shoreline, and these conditions, mixed with an improperly set umbrella, can mean trouble.

Unfortunately, every summer the beach patrol responds to medical emergencies caused by flying umbrellas. In some cases injuries are serious enough to require EMS response. It is almost never the person who owns the umbrella that gets hit, but someone else's umbrella that hits some unsuspecting person. These accidents can often be prevented and are basically caused by an umbrella that was not set properly in the sand. Not only does a flying umbrella often result in some type of injury, it can also have legal ramifications. The owner of the flying umbrella can be held responsible for any injury caused to another person. In fact this summer alone I personally responded to two accidents where the owner of the umbrella will be held responsible for some medical bills. One of the incidents the owner of the umbrella will be paying some hefty dental bills for the person that was hit by the umbrella. This is why it is important to follow a few important bits of advice when setting beach umbrellas.

1. If you rent an umbrella make sure the beach stand operator is the person that sets it. If you reset the umbrella on your own, you are responsible.
2. When setting the umbrella just jabbing it into the ground is not enough. You must jab and then rock the whole umbrella pole back and forth until about 18-24 inches of the pole are beneath the sand (the length of an adult's forearm from elbow to outstretched fingers). Screwing the umbrella into the sand is not effective.
3. Make sure the umbrella is tilted into the wind. This will prevent a gust from getting up under the umbrella. The greater the wind speed the smaller the angle should be between the beach and umbrella.
4. Use common sense. If winds are high and you are using a wimpy plastic or light metal umbrella or your umbrella setting skills are poor, do not set your umbrella.

A lifeguard on duty may give you these tips and suggestions, but will not set your umbrella for you. Lifeguards will also make an effort to warn people of high winds. Lifeguards also ask you to set all umbrellas behind their stands. Umbrellas set east of the lifeguard stand impede the lifeguard's view. If you arrive at the beach before lifeguards are on duty be sure to set your umbrella a few yards behind the high tide line. Happy shading under your properly set umbrella. Cheers!



Captain's Note: Placing your umbrella behind the imaginary line between stands is more than a suggestion it is a city ordinance that is enforced by the beach patrol. The surf rescue technician needs a clear line of sight to perform their duty of keeping you safe and has the authority to request umbrellas be moved or that they be taken down based on changing conditions for the safety of all beach patrons. In fact, when the SRT sees an umbrella being blown down the beach they will respond to stop the umbrella as quickly as if responding to a surf rescue.



Using an umbrella as a wind break can make an otherwise chilly day at the beach more comfortable.

Photo by Kristin Josen