



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.



Riding Waves in Ocean City

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Riding waves is fun. It is something that the Polynesians have done for over a thousand years, and it is undoubtedly one of the main reasons many people come to Ocean City. Whether it is body surfing, boogie boarding, or surfing at our surfing beaches, riding the waves is one of the least expensive and fun things you can do at the beach.

Although it is fun to ride waves, it can be dangerous. Every summer the Ocean City Beach Patrol responds to impact injuries caused by either riding waves improperly or in the wrong conditions. Many of these injuries require EMS response, the person being put on a backboard, and then taken to the hospital. A handful of the injuries are so severe they require helicopter response and the person being flown to Shock Trauma in Baltimore.

This may all seem a bit shocking, but it is important for people to realize the ocean is powerful and unpredictable and may be dangerous. However, there are precautions you can and should take.

We have two important rules to keep you safe. First, only go in the ocean when the beach patrol is on duty and secondly, talk to your lifeguard about current conditions. If you are body boarding take precautions after speaking to the lifeguard about the conditions before entering the water. If the surf is heavy (bigger than 3 or 4 feet) and the tide is low do not consider boarding unless you are a very skilled boarder with proper equipment. It is also important to know your limits. If you are an inexperienced boogie boarder or not in great physical condition you should not consider going out in heavy surf. If you experience any trouble, stay on your board because it will keep you afloat. We often see people get in trouble and ditch their floatation device in a panic.

Body surfing is considered the purist form of wave riding and can be great fun. But there are precautions to take when body surfing. Once again, speak to the lifeguard about the conditions before entering the water. Second, if the surf is bigger than 3 or 4 feet you should not consider body surfing. You must be realistic and consider your age and physical condition. In body surfing it is your own body that takes the impact of the wave, so you should be in very good physical health before attempting to body surf. In many areas of Ocean City we have what lifeguards call, "shorebreak". Shorebreak are waves that roll in and either break very near the beach in extremely shallow water or roll directly up to the beach and then break right on the sand. We strongly urge beach patrons not to attempt to ride these waves because it is extremely dangerous. Being slammed by shore break causes a great many serious injuries. Lastly, remember if you are in doubt don't go out.



Captain's Note:

The most common culprit of neck injuries results from swimmers that are body surfing or body boarding incorrectly or in unsafe conditions. The proper technique for riding a wave is get in front of the wave so it is pushing you out in front and finish your ride before running out of water.

Body boarding on the top of a breaking wave may cause you to be propelled to the ocean floor (we call this going over the falls). To prevent this, stay on the rear half of the board and if you need to bailout, go off the back of the board. The proper way to body surf a wave is to have your hands out in front of your body; this allows for more control of movement in the water. The most dangerous condition exists when we are experiencing shorebreak. Shorebreak occurs when waves rather than breaking on the sandbar continue to build and crash with full force on the shore with little or no water depth. When unsuspecting victims find themselves on a breaking wave and they are being thrown into shallow water they have set themselves up for a tragedy. NEVER ride a wave during shorebreak conditions or play in the impact zone!

Although education and prevention are the primary focus of the beach patrol mission, SRTs (lifeguards) are well trained and prepared to handle severe neck and back injuries (although we prefer preventing injuries before they occur). Our beach patrol developed and modified a technique of removing victims with suspected neck or back injuries out of deep and or shallow water. The technique has been refined over many years of training and usage from its introduction as a technique developed in Hawaii. The modified technique is unique to our agency but has developed with input from the medical community and emergency providers. It has been approved by MIEMS as a state standard with the Ocean City Beach Patrol as the only organization that is certified to teach other first responders and organizations this technique.

On land it is always best not to move a person who may have a back injury. In the ocean the movement of the waves makes leaving the victim in the surf to possibly sustain more injuries impossible. Using backboards in the surf zone can actually cause more damage to a victim. Beach patrol guards are taught how to effectively and carefully extract victims from the surf who are suspected to have serious spinal injuries. Guards work as a team to carry a victim to safety while minimizing movement to the head, neck, and back. Never underestimate the power of the ocean, keep yourself and your loved ones safe by always checking with the SRT on duty about daily surf conditions at your beach!

Because of the seriousness and frequency of water related spinal injuries throughout the world, the Ocean City Beach Patrol has assisted several television networks to produce stories about the dangers associated with head, neck, and back injuries at the beach. To view these segments and learn more about shorebreak and how to prevent these injuries visit our website at www.ococean.com/ocbp click on the NEWS button.