
INFORMATION BULLETIN

For Immediate Release
2019PSSG0072-001348
June 27, 2019

Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
BC Coroners Service

Summer water safety tips

VICTORIA – Now that summer is officially here and locals and visitors to British Columbia are frequenting lakes, rivers and the ocean, the BC Coroners Service, Lifesaving Society of BC and Yukon and the Canadian Red Cross are urging residents and visitors to take extra care when they are spending time near water.

Although the latest available preliminary data from 2016 shows a decline in the number of unintentional drownings, the BC Coroners Service is already investigating a number of drowning incidents this year that occurred in B.C. waterways. Statistics collected by the BC Coroners Service consistently show a spike in drowning deaths each summer, with the numbers beginning to increase late in May and continuing to rise through until early September.

“Tragically, most of the drowning deaths that occur in B.C. happen during the summer months when people are enjoying recreational time boating or swimming at our beautiful lakes, rivers and oceanfront beaches,” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner. “Many of these deaths could have been prevented had a personal floatation device been worn. We also find that a significant number of those who die were under the influence of alcohol or other impairing substances at the time of death. This is a reminder to everyone who will be on or near the water this summer to exercise care and good judgement — nobody expects to get into trouble while boating or swimming, but a few moments to consider the risks and plan accordingly can prevent tragic outcomes.”

The BC Coroners Service emphasizes the need for visitors from other countries, or even other regions, to understand the dangers that may lurk in or near B.C.’s lakes and rivers. These include sudden drop-offs into deep water, unexpectedly cold water temperatures, unexpected underwater obstacles and unstable or slippery rock edges above cliffs and waterfalls. Waters in B.C. are also frequently much colder than in other countries or provinces. People hosting someone from out of town are asked to warn them of these potential hazards.

“While it’s encouraging to see a decline in the number of drownings in B.C., we continue to see the same trends year to year,” said Dale Miller, executive director, Lifesaving Society. “Nearly half of drowning victims are males in the 20 to 34 year-old and 65 plus year-old categories. Those close to these men need to emphasize the importance of not taking risks around water and wearing a lifejacket when boating.”

Shelley Dalke, director of swimming and water safety, Canadian Red Cross, said, “There are several things people can do to increase safety around the water this summer. Examples include making (and sharing) a plan for safety before every outing, ensuring barriers are in place to prevent unintended access to water for toddlers, and supervising all participants in pool/open water activities vigilantly. Additional training such as swimming lessons, learning

how to perform safe rescues and first aid are important skills to have as well. Many tragic water-related fatalities, however, can be prevented by wearing a lifejacket. If people go boating, or if they have limited or no swimming abilities but are playing near or in water, they must wear a lifejacket.”

Data from 2016 showed a total of 47 drownings, the lowest number in the past decade, down from 80 in 2015. More than one-third of those deaths occurred in the southern Interior region of B.C.

The latest Coroners Report on accidental drownings can be found under Recreational Activities at: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/life-events/death/coroners-service/statistical-reports>

Learn More:

For further information about water safety tips, visit the following sites:

Canadian Red Cross: <http://www.redcross.ca/training-and-certification/swimming-and-water-safety-tips-and-resources/swimming--boating-and-water-safety-tips>

The Lifesaving Society: <http://www.lifesaving.bc.ca/boating-safety-tips-33-languages>

Drowning stats infographic from Lifesaving Society: <https://www.lifesaving.bc.ca/drowning-stats>

National Drowning Prevention Week (July 21-27, 2019): <https://www.lifesaving.bc.ca/drowning-preventable>

A backgrounder follows.

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Canadian Red Cross
BC and Yukon Media Line: 604 709-6747
National Media Line: 1 877 599-9602

Connect with the Province of B.C. at: news.gov.bc.ca/connect

BACKGROUND

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Facts about water safety

- Almost two-thirds of the deaths occur between May and September each year.
- Three in every four deaths involve a male and people aged 20-34 account for 26% of water-related deaths.
- More than one-third of the deaths occur in lakes or ponds.
- In any small craft, wear a properly-fitted personal floatation device (PFD) at all times when on the water. Having one in the boat is not sufficient as immersions from boats are typically unintentional and in as many as 70% of boating incidents, the person becomes separated from the boat.
- Children, non-swimmers and weak swimmers should also wear a PFD when wading or playing in the water at a river or lakeside.
- Do not mix alcohol with boating, swimming or other recreational water activities. A study published in the Injury Prevention journal suggests that someone with a blood-alcohol level of 0.10 has about 10 times the risk of drowning during boating and that even a small amount of alcohol can increase the risk as a result of impaired co-ordination and judgment. Impairment is illegal for someone driving a boat, but it is also a risk for passengers who are more likely to fall into the water. Impairment by alcohol or drugs is also often a contributing factor in cases in which someone has accidentally fallen into water from shore.
- Be aware of the water conditions where activities are being planned. Check the weather forecast before heading out and also do a visual inspection of the area. Do not head down a river without being aware of the water conditions further downstream. If there are warning signs posted, obey them.
- If hosting visitors from another province or country, ensure that they are informed about the conditions that prevail in the lake or river being visited. Warn them about steep drop-offs, rapids, currents, cold water and any other hazards.
- Always supervise children anywhere near water. Pre-school-aged children can drown in only a few centimetres of water and drowning is often silent. Young children should be within arm's reach of a responsible adult. Swimming ability does not replace the need to supervise children around the water as their decision-making skills are still in development.
- Never dive into unknown waters. Unexpectedly shallow water or hidden obstacles underwater can easily prove fatal. Diving from cliffs or from other great heights is exceptionally risky.
- Never swim alone. Always have a buddy and keep an eye out for each other.

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