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Be a buddy

Swim safe this summer by teaming up

By Mollie Miller

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There one minute, gone the next.

This is how witnesses often describe the circumstances leading up to the drowning death of a friend or family member.

“The speed with which something can happen that leads to a drowning death can be incredibly quick,” said U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center Safety Specialist Richard Scott. “When someone’s head drops below the water line, things go very bad very fast.”

During the past two years, the Army has lost five Soldiers to drowning. In most of the incidents, the Soldiers were surrounded by friends, fellow Soldiers or Family members during vacations or unit sponsored activities.

“Sometimes, just being around a lot of people isn’t enough when it comes to staying safe in the water,” Scott said. “Being a buddy and actively watching for signs that someone is struggling can make the difference between a fun day in the water and a terrible tragedy.”

Jon Cole, aquatics manager at Fort Rucker, Ala., said the importance of having a buddy when swimming can never be underestimated.

“There are so many factors that can lead to drowning and having a ‘buddy’ there to watch out for some of the most common problems can certainly help keep swimmers safe,” Cole said.

Scott said water safety is all about using common sense, understanding your own abilities and those of your buddy and knowing the different risks associated with pools, oceans, lakes and rivers.

“To be safe, you have to know the threats, know your limitations and know how to keep yourself and your friends and family out of harm’s way at all times when around the water,” he said.

The American Red Crosses’ “Too List” is a good place for people to start when educating themselves about things they can do to mitigate risks associated with water fun.

“The list reminds people to never get ‘too tired, too cold, too far away from safety, too much sun or too much strenuous activity,’” Scott said.

There are several things buddies should look out for that may indicate that a swimmer has gotten “too” much of something and is struggling, according to Cole.

“Things to look out for in your buddy are general signs of sudden illness and respiratory distress,” he said. “Some things you might see are changes in breathing, dizziness or light-headedness, increased heart rate, chest pain or discomfort, flushed, pale, ashen or bluish skin, inability to speak in full sentences or tingling in hands, feet or lips.”

Jody Valdes, life guard and assistant aquatics manager at Fort Rucker, Ala., said she has seen many children and adults who have over estimated their swimming abilities, grown too tired and had to be rescued.

“It’s important to know your limitations,” she said. “Just stay in the shallow end and work on your skills until you are ready for a longer swim.”

If a buddy notices their partner is experiencing some trouble in the water, Cole said there are several things that can be done to help the struggling swimmer if a lifeguard is not available.

“The main rescue that untrained bystanders can do is a reaching assist,” Cole said. “This would include using any sort of a long, rigid object to reach to a person from a poolside or boat. When conducting a reaching assist it is very important to kneel, lie down, or maintain a low center of gravity so as to not to be pulled into the water as well.”

Cole said bystanders can also assist a struggling swimmer by throwing a rope or any sort of buoyant object to the individual. If it is absolutely necessary for an individual to enter the water, they should do so with two buoyant objects, one for themselves and one for the victim. If a victim does not recognize the rescuer is approaching and the object cannot be easily handed to the victim without any bodily contact, the victim should be approached from behind so that they cannot easily grab hold of the rescuer.

“The last thing we want is for a potential rescuer to turn into a victim,” Cole said.

Wherever swimmers find themselves having fun this summer, Scott is quick to stress that alcohol never mixes well with any water activity.

“The dangers are always there,” he said. “Never underestimate the power of water.”

For more information about water safety, visit the American Red Cross Web site at <https://www.prepare.org>. For more information about the Army’s Safe Summer Campaign, visit <https://safety.army.mil>.

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INFO BOX

Water-related injury prevention tips

- Designate a responsible adult to watch young children while around water. Adults should not be involved in any other distracting activity while supervising children.
- Always swim with a buddy. Select swimming sites that have lifeguards whenever possible.
- Avoid drinking alcohol before or during any water activity.
- Learn to swim.
- Learn cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).
- Do not use air-filled or foam toys like “water wings,” “noodles” or inner-tubes in place of personal flotation devices. These toys are not designed to keep swimmers safe.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



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