Keeping Summer Swimming Safe

Summer is now well underway. The warmer weather and longer days mean frequent trips to the lake, heading out to the local pool, or finding somewhere else nearby to cool off.

Swimming is one of the most popular summer activities among people of all ages. It also is a great form of exercise. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), water-based exercise can help people with chronic diseases like arthritis, can benefit older adults by improving the quality of life and decreasing disability, and can improve mental health.

"Swimming is an excellent exercise. It is a full body exercise that is typically safe and effective. It's easy on your joints and a great way to stay in shape and to get exercise in the summer. However, it is not without risk," says Dr. Bill Walsh, chief medical officer at OSF HealthCare Little Company of Mary Medical Center in Evergreen Park, Illinois.

According to the CDC, there are approximately 3,960 fatal unintentional drownings per year in the U.S. – which is an average of 11 drowning deaths per day. Dr. Walsh says it is important to remain vigilant about the dangers of drowning – especially when children are involved.

"If your children are going in the water, you should watch them all the time and not rely on a lifeguard to watch your child in a pool with 50 other kids. You need to watch your children in the water even if they can swim and even if they are not in deep water. It would not take long for your child to be injured or drown when in a pool unsupervised – we are talking about 15 to 30 seconds and it will be life changing," warns Dr. Walsh, who has a background in emergency medicine.

In addition to close monitoring, additional precautions should also be taken when heading out to swim. The American Red Cross recommends taking safety measures such as: ensuring that young children or inexperienced swimmers wear U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets around water; having appropriate safety equipment on-hand, like reaching or throwing equipment, a cell phone, flotation devices, and a first aid kit; and always swimming with a designated swim buddy.

Dr. Walsh adds that paying extra attention to any signs that are posted in the area you plan to swim is important.

"If you are going to be swimming, make sure you swim in an area that is public and monitored. If there are signs that say 'no swimming' – there are reasons for that sign. It is risky and could be life-threatening. So do not swim in those areas. Make sure you're in a public area that is monitored. If there is a lifeguard on duty – even safer. Swim in the daylight hours so you can keep an eye on your party – and never swim alone," Dr. Walsh advises.

Even if you are taking a break from the water and sitting on the sidelines, you should be aware of other potential risks of spending time outside in the summer, including sunburn, overheating, and dehydration. Wearing sunscreen, drinking water, and protecting yourself from the sun are also important safety measures to take when venturing out for some fun in the sun – especially on extra hot days.

So at what point should you seek medical attention for a swimming mishap?

"If you are involved in an incident where somebody is underwater for a period of time and there is any alteration of consciousness, bring them to an emergency department – even if they regain consciousness. If you pull someone out of the water and they are coughing and gagging and short of breath, or have any color change to their skin, bring them to an emergency department immediately," says Dr. Walsh.

If you or a loved one is involved in a swimming incident that requires immediate medical attention, call 911 or go to the closest emergency room.