



Water Safety Abroad

If you will be spending time in or around water on your next international trip, be cautious when swimming, boating, or diving, particularly in developing countries where emergency services may not be quickly accessible.

Drowning accounts for 13% of deaths in US travelers abroad. It is the leading cause of death in US travelers visiting countries where water-related activities are popular, such as Fiji, the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Costa Rica. Whether you will be swimming in a lavish hotel pool in Europe or scuba diving off the Great Barrier Reef, follow these tips to stay healthy and safe on your trip.



Prevent Injury and Drowning

- **Learn about health and safety risks at your destination.**
 - Research local water conditions, currents, and rules before you get in the water.
 - Ask about local sea animals, such as urchins, jellyfish, coral, and sea lice. A sting from a sea creature could be fatal, or at least spoil your trip with severe pain.
 - Use experienced guides when boating, scuba diving, or participating in other water-related activities.
- **Be aware of your surroundings.**
 - Pay attention to colored beach flags posted on the beach, which indicate if it is safe to swim or not. Make sure you understand and follow these local warnings.
 - Watch for signs of [rip currents](http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov/overview.shtml) (water moving quickly away from the shore), which can forcefully pull you in. If you are caught in a rip current, swim parallel to the shore until free from the rip current, then swim diagonally toward the shore.
- **Take steps to prevent injury.**
 - Use proper safety equipment such as life jackets.
 - Never swim alone or in unfamiliar waters. Even if you're a strong swimmer, circumstances beyond your control (like rip currents) can kill.
 - To lower your risk of drowning, do NOT drink alcohol before or during swimming, diving, or boating. Alcohol affects balance, coordination, and judgment. Among adolescents and adults, alcohol use is involved in up to 70% of deaths associated with water recreation.
 - Do NOT dive in shallow water. Always enter water feet first.
 - Be aware of hidden obstacles (like rocks or fallen trees) in the water that could cause injury.
 - Supervise children closely around water. Drowning is a leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 14.

Avoid Germs in the Water

- **Take steps to prevent infections that can spread from contact with water.**
 - Contaminated fresh water can cause infections, such as [schistosomiasis](#) and [leptospirosis](#).
 - Don't swallow the water. It may have harmful germs.
 - Don't swim or wade:
 - Near storm drains.
 - In water that may be contaminated with sewage, human or animal feces and urine, or wastewater runoff.
 - In lakes or rivers after heavy rainfall.
 - In freshwater streams, canal, and lakes – especially in areas where schistosomiasis is common, such as the Caribbean, South

American, Africa, and Asia.

- In warm seawater if you have open cuts or wounds. Breaks in the skin can let harmful germs into your body.
- Protect the health of others by NOT swimming if you have diarrhea. Any amount of infected fecal matter can contaminate an entire pool or hot tub and make others sick if they swallow the water.
- To find out if the water at your next destination carries risk for these infections, search your Destination and check the link to “Stay Healthy and Safe,” where you will find precautions for staying safe around water (under “Stay safe outdoors”).

Scuba Diving

Many people travel to tropical areas of the world to dive. Like any other adventure sport, scuba diving has risks. Make sure you are properly trained and certified for scuba diving. Before you take the plunge, keep these tips in mind:

- **Make an appointment** with a travel medicine specialist (<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/content/travel-clinics.aspx>) or your healthcare provider at least 4 to 6 weeks before you leave to ensure you are fit to participate in recreation water activities and get any needed vaccines or medicines for your destination.
- Make sure your gear, such as scuba masks and tanks, is properly fitted and maintained.
- Understand the risks and disorders that may arise during or after diving, such as decompression sickness (DCS).
 - DCS, also called “the bends,” occurs when moving too quickly from an area of high pressure (deep under water) to low pressure. DCS can obstruct blood flow or oxygen to the tissues, which can be very painful and sometimes fatal.
 - To prevent DCS, avoid flying for more than
 - 24–48 hours after a dive that required decompression stops (pauses in your ascent)
 - 12 hours after surfacing from a single no-decompression dive (without having to pause during your ascent)
 - 18 hours after repetitive dives or multiple days of diving.



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National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases (NCEZID) (<https://www.cdc.gov/ncezid/index.html>)

Division of Global Migration and Quarantine (DGMQ) (<https://www.cdc.gov/ncezid/dgmgq/index.html>)