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Rip Current Safety

Have fun, but stay safe when swimming in Lake Michigan to avoid deadly rip currents.

Posted: 4:32 PM May 27, 2011
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Rip Current Safety

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Over the last 10 years, 17 people have lost their lives on a 50 mile stretch of beach from Michigan City to St. Joseph, Michigan. That's the same number of people in our area who have lost their lives to tornadoes, strong winds, lightning and flooding combined. Font Size: A A A

Many local officials and scientists have been working with the National Weather Service this year to try to prevent more deaths this summer and for years to come. There has been a series of meetings to discuss how to better educate the public on the dangers of rip currents both before that day at the beach, and also while at the beach.

There are two main types of rip currents that form on Lake Michigan. One is along piers and jetties, and the other is in breaks in the sandbar. Swimmers can be swept away very quickly, and tire easily as they try to fight the current. Even strong swimmers will have trouble in rip currents, as many people tend to underestimate the strength of the currents.

A big problem is that many of the warnings get ignored. Some people still swim even when told by the lifeguards to get out of the water, or they go to an unguarded beach.

Another problem is that many beaches along the lake don't have lifeguards at all. That's the problem for Mike Davidson, the Fire Chief for Chikaming Township in Berrien County. Instead of a lifeguard on the scene, his department is the first to respond. He says that a on a beach with lifeguards, the response time is as little as 15 seconds. But when there are no lifeguards and you are relying on the fire department to respond, that time can go up to between 8 and 15 minutes. That's a long time to be trying to struggle in the water. He has only done recoveries rather than rescues in his 26 years of service. Fire departments near the lake are investing in more training and rescue resources to try to do more rescues than recoveries.

So, what do you do if you are caught in a rip current? First and foremost, try not to panic. Rather than trying to swim back towards the shore, swim parallel to the shore until you are no longer in the current, then swim back toward the shore.

The best thing you can do is use common sense, and stay out of the water on days when it is potentially dangerous. Heed the warning of the flags, signs, and lifeguards. And keep in mind that the stronger and larger the waves, the better chance there is for rip currents to form. Remember the saying, "When in doubt, stay out."

You can find your beach and boating forecast on-air every morning, as well as online on our newly revamped beach and boating page on wndu.com. You'll find it on the pull-down menu under the word "weather."

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