

New Haven Register

Experts say it's too easy for swimmers to get in over their heads

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Tom Bellini and children Tommy, 7, Jake, 4, and Isabella, 2, (from left) explore the sandbar connecting Silver Sands State Park to Charles Island. Arnold Gold/Register

It's as easy as going for a short swim and ending up too far out with the current getting stronger and the tide pulling you farther from the shore.

Or jumping off a rock into a lake without knowing what lies beneath the placid surface. Or taking your eye off of a child in the water for even a split second.

Experts say many summer drownings start off as stories like these and quickly spiral into tragedies, leaving friends and family wondering how such a thing could happen to their loved one.

A recent spate of drownings in Connecticut underscores the need to educate people about the inherent dangers of summertime swimming, according to water-safety advocates all over the state.

"It's just clear to us that there is something going on here," said Dennis Schain, spokesman for the Department of Environmental Protection.

Last winter, the DEP gathered a group of agencies including the Red Cross, local YMCA branches and municipal parks and recreation departments to form a task force with the goal of increasing awareness about water safety across the state. Out of that task force came a partnership with the DEP, the state Department of Children and Families and the YMCA to offer free swim lessons to kids.

"We take it very seriously. We know we have a big challenge in helping to protect people and ensure everyone's safety," Schain said.

He said 22 people have drowned in state parks since 1998, including the most recent case of 19-year-old Jarvell Ward of Bronx, N.Y., who was pulled from Squantz Pond in New Fairfield on Tuesday and died the next day. That figure does not include the rest of the state's drownings that happen in swimming pools, rivers and nonstate park lakes.

While many drownings involve people jumping off of rocks or cliffs into bodies of water — sometimes after drinking alcohol — a good number of drownings happen to young children who can't swim or adults who get in over their head.

Robert Levine, director of the New Haven Parks and Recreation Department and a member of the water-safety task force, said there is no easy solution to preventing drownings, but there are steps people can take to make it less likely to happen. For parents, that means supervising kids at all times when they are near the water and keeping young children at arm's length. Swimmers should know their abilities and not go too far from shore where they could tire out and not be able to swim back.

And then there are those guardian angels of beaches everywhere — lifeguards.

Levine said the city has had problems getting enough lifeguards in the past to staff its five pools and one beach. He said the job is a tough one and can be rewarding after a rescue or devastating after a loss.

"Whenever there's a near-drowning or a drowning, it is a cataclysmic event for those involved. We've had lifeguards resign because of the intense emotions," Levine said.

Brandt Thomas, a 14-year veteran lifeguard at Hammonasset Beach State Park who now supervises the lifeguards there, knows well the intense pressures placed on lifeguards.

The lifeguards at Hammonasset sit perched on high chairs looking out over thousands of people swimming and splashing around in Long Island Sound on any given weekend. He said they are trained to meticulously scan the length of the water looking for heads bobbing or people too far out.

"We've pulled quite a few people out — mostly young children playing right at the edge of the water," he said, adding, "But this year has been very good so far."

There hasn't been a drowning at Hammonasset since 1995 when a member of the Nepalese Special Olympics team went missing while swimming there during the Special Olympics World Games.

Thomas, who was a lifeguard at the time, said most of the problems these days have to do with people deciding to swim outside of the lifeguard-staffed swimming areas. People apparently try to avoid the guards so they can use blow-up rafts, water wings and boogie boards, which are not allowed in the water because they provide a false sense of security to those who use them.

Jack Harder, director of community education for the Red Cross in mid-Fairfield County, said one thing that can prevent any number of water catastrophes is common sense.

"The best thing you can do is use your head. If you're in an area where there's 'no trespassing' signs, there's a reason," he said.

Harder said one problem area for swimmers is in Milford at Silver Sands State Park, where people stroll out along the sand bar to Charles Island and then find themselves stranded after the tide comes in.

"People try to swim back to shore and they get in trouble out there," he said. Harder said the island is a lot farther from shore than it looks and the swim can be dangerously long and difficult due to currents from the tides.

Captain Michael McDaniel of the Milford Fire Department said firefighters go out on their rescue boat at least five times a year to save people caught in the water at high tide between Charles Island and the Milford shore.

"The tide moves pretty quickly," he said.

Gary Kleeblatt, communications director for DCF, said his department is waging a campaign to educate parents about ways to keep their children safe during the summer months, when many accidents happen, including drownings. Radio advertisements are running on 16 stations talking about summer safety issues.

Kleeblatt acknowledged this year's drownings, saying it's a real problem and parents can't be too careful.

"In the water, the vigilance level has to be the highest. You cannot turn your back on your children for 10 seconds," he said.

For more information about water safety, free swim lessons and tips about keeping kids safe, visit www.haveasafesummer.com .