July 3, 2019

Stay safe around water activities this summer

MOBILE, Alabama — The Independence Day celebration is upon us this week. This means many families will be looking to cool off from the hot weather by enjoying a splash in a pool or a ride in a boat.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention would like to remind everyone to be safe during these water activities. Every day, about 10 people die from unintentional drowning.

Drowning is the fifth leading cause of unintentional injury death for people of all ages, and the second leading cause of injury death for children ages 1 to 14 years. In fact, more children ages 1 to 4 years die from drowning than any other cause of death except birth defects.

Here are some safety tips that the Mobile County Health Department encourages everyone to follow, not only this week but for the entire summer:

Life jackets – Statistics show that drowning is the single biggest cause of death in recreational boating accidents, accounting for 76 percent of fatalities. The great majority of these drownings were precipitated by unexpected entry into the water, which means the victim had no time to grab a life jacket before entering the water. The data shows 84.5 percent of drowning victims were NOT wearing life jackets when found.

“It is vitally important to wear your life jacket or personal flotation device while on or near the water,” said Lt. Cmdr. Trevor A. Blount, Command Center Chief with U.S. Coast Guard Sector Mobile. “In an emergency, you may not have the time to put it on and save your life. All adults are highly encouraged to do so, and mariners should abide by state laws requiring use of life jackets by children. A life jacket can save your life if you wear it.”

Every boat operated on Alabama’s waterways is required to carry one Coast Guard-approved Type I, II, III or V life jacket or personal flotation device (PFD) for each person on board or being towed by the boat. If a Type V is used, it must be approved for the activity at hand. More details can be found at www.uscgboating.org/recreational-boaters/life-jacket-wear-wearing-your-life-jacket.php.

All life jackets and PFDs must be in good and serviceable condition, be readily accessible and be of the proper size for the intended wearer. Sizing for life jackets/PFDs is based on body weight and chest size. In Alabama, passengers under 8 years of age are required to wear a Coast Guard-approved life jacket while on board any boat (unless they are in an enclosed cabin).

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Float plan – Why should you take the time to prepare a float plan? There are just too many facts that need to be accurately remembered and ultimately conveyed in an emergency situation. Without a float plan you are counting on someone else, a friend, neighbor or family member to remember detailed information that rescue personnel need in order to find you. For convenience, the float plan can be left on the dash of the vehicle located at the launch site. A sample document from the U.S. Coast Guard can be found at http://floatplancentral.cgaux.org/

Swimming pools – You can help someone who is having trouble in the water without getting wet. This is important because you also need to stay safe. Going into the water to help someone who is having trouble could cause you to get in trouble. So remember: “Reach or Throw, Don’t Go.” (www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/atg/PDFs/Take_a_Class/Reach_or_throw_dont_go.pdf)

When helping someone in the water it is always best to reach or throw, don’t go. If someone is showing signs that they are having trouble in the water and are close to shore or close to the side of the pool, you should reach something out to the person. Use any object that extends your reach, such as a pole, empty picnic cooler, paddle, ring buoy, tree branch or a belt.

Other issues to remember – Sometimes problems arrive while on a boat, and you are either out of cellphone range or your marine radio is inoperable. If possible, share your situation and location with another boater who can relay the information to family members or emergency personnel.

Responsible for most rescues performed by lifeguards, rip currents can form in any large open water area, such as low spots and breaks in sandbars, or near structures such as jetties and piers. Check conditions before entering the water: are any warning flags up? Ask a lifeguard about water conditions, beach conditions, and potential hazards.

Pools and beaches are just a few locations available for water sports. Swimming in lakes, rivers and streams can also present challenges. Be sure you are water competent for natural environments before swimming. Always enter unknown or shallow waters feet first. Watch out for currents, waves and underwater obstructions – they are not just found in the ocean.

Sunburn affects your body’s ability to cool down and can make you dehydrated. If you must go outdoors, protect yourself from the sun by wearing a wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses and by putting on sunscreen of SPF 15 or higher 30 minutes prior to going out. Continue to reapply it according to the package directions.

Avoiding dehydration is vital to dealing with hot weather. Drink more fluids (especially water), regardless of how active you are. Do not wait until you are thirsty to drink. Stay away from very sugary or alcoholic drinks, as these actually cause you to lose more body fluid. Also avoid very cold drinks, because they can cause stomach cramps.

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