

Child safety: Snorkeling



infect small wounds, especially in a warm water environment. The most interesting sea life is often to be seen close to the rocks and reefs that provide their habitat. Common snorkeling injuries include minor lacerations from coral, marine life stings, and bruises and lacerations due to wave currents pushing snorkellers against rocks and coral. The risk of sunburn is also high, and should not be underestimated.

Recent Cases in Europe include:

A British father watched his daughter die when she was struck by a passing motorboat.

A near drowning occurred to a snorkeler in Greece who became entangled in ropes and had to be freed with a knife.

Why snorkeling can be risky for children

Children may need more practice than adults in co-coordinating swimming movements. Breathing through a snorkel tube takes practice, especially when learning how to clear the water from tube and keep the mask clear at the same time. In open water, practising these techniques while surrounded by marine life and while trying to keep flippers away from rocks, coral and plant life can overwhelm inexperienced snorkelers quickly. Therefore, snorkelers should first learn to use equipment in a pool, and then practice in safe shallows before venturing away from the beach.

Snorkeling provides an excellent window into the underwater world for all ages, and is a great introductory water activity for children. However, it must not be forgotten that anytime a person enters the water, they are having a wilderness experience, at the mercy of the elements of nature. Therefore, it is important to do a little extra preparation and training for all who are entering the water, especially children.

Snorkeling along coral reefs is a wonderful learning experience, but risks are posed by the wave currents present in shallow coral reefs, as well as the dangers of stings and bites from marine life. Live coral often contain bacteria that can quickly

Snorkelers should be taught the techniques of: mask clearing, how to clear a snorkel tube, and how to avoid striking against rocks and reefs by kicking backwards with their flippers while on their backs. Younger children may not have the lung capacity to blow a snorkel clear with breath, in which case teach them to raise their heads up and drain water by removing the mouthpiece as an emergency alternative. Teach young children how to defog their masks with a dab of spit and water.

Recommendations for snorkeling services for children

- All children venturing into open water must wear a personal flotation device (PFD).
- Children should be taught to use basic hand signals, including “okay”, “no”, “follow me”, “this way”, “help me”, “danger”, “come up,” “go down” and something wrong.”
- Children must be instructed not to reach out or touch any plant or marine life, including coral, nor to approach holes and crevices (which are usually populated). Use the phrase “Look, don’t touch, only take photos.”
- Beginners should only snorkel in enclosed, calmer waters in safe designated areas away from watercraft traffic.

- The 'A' flag (Alpha flag) should be flown when snorkelers are diving from a boat to warn other water users to stay clear.
- Children must have previous experience swimming and treading water in open water.
- All child snorkelers should be assigned an adult snorkel buddy who is not a beginner.
- In cool waters, a wetsuit should be worn, and even in warmer waters a wet suit is recommended to help minimise abrasion injuries. Children will feel colder far sooner than adults, so plan trips that take that into account.
- In warm climates a 'T' shirt should be worn to guard against sunburn.
- Any breeze over 15 knots can cause water turbulence which can decrease water visibility. Snorkeling should not take place in sea conditions above a force 4 wind speed or where the wave height is above 1 metre.
- All snorkelers should be warned about when to expect tide changes and how that might affect the areas they will be visiting.
- Areas of fast moving water should be avoided and dive guides must steer clear of any area where rip currents are present or likely to occur.

A child who has any known sting allergies (i.e. bee) has a higher likelihood of marine sting allergies as well.

What safety factors to look for in choosing and maintaining equipment for your operation

Check that the snorkel has not been damaged and that the mouthpiece has no rips. Masks must have tempered glass, and straps and flippers showing signs of wear should be replaced. Wet suits and snorkels should be cleaned and disinfected with a non-allergenic cleanser between users. Masks should be washed with fresh water and a disinfectant cleanser after usage and stored out of the sun in a cool dry place.

Staff Preparedness

- Always have at least two staff members present – one to speak with clients and handle training, and the other to monitor snorkelers and assist in entry and exit activity.
- Be sure all staff members are trained in CPR and first aid.
- In addition to a first aid kit, the office and tour leaders should have an anaphylactic shock kit or EpiPen on hand to counteract a sting allergy. Only emergency personnel or staff with the appropriate level of medical training should perform this treatment.
- Snorkel excursions with young children require extra staffing or adult supervision. Children may need extra assistance entering and exiting the water.
- If you will be leading a tour, have a safety plan in place. Large groups with children should be accompanied by a safety boat and should not roam far from shore or in choppy waters.
- When leading a snorkel boat excursion, do not forget to fly the "A" (alpha flag) to indicate your presence to boaters.
- Staff should regularly check water and wind conditions; children will be less able than adults to deal with bad conditions.
- All staff members should be able to clearly communicate risks and safety rules to clients. A language barrier could pose a problem should an accident occur, both in terms of immediate medical care and liability for having failed to properly communicate the rules.