

Childhood Drowning

- Drowning is a major cause of death and disability in the world¹. It is the second most frequent cause of injury death in children aged 0-19 years in the WHO European region, with more than 5000 deaths each year². Boys are two times more likely to drown than girls and the most vulnerable ones are children one to four years of age³.
- Drowning refers to an event in which a child's airway is submerged in liquid, leading to an impairment of breathing. The outcome can be fatal or non fatal.
- A drowning incident in the home takes many people by surprise, as it happens silently within seconds, in as little as 2 cm of water, in less time than it takes to answer the telephone. It can take place in the bathtub or swimming pool or any container of water such as a large pail or garden pond. The estimated time that a child who has drowned was noted to be missing was usually less than 5 minutes and in swimming pool drownings, no caregiver has ever reported hearing a splash, even when the caregiver was by the poolside⁴.
- In the United Kingdom more children die in pools while abroad on vacation than while in the United Kingdom and more than half of those who drown can in fact swim⁵.
- For every child who drowns in the Netherlands in a given year, an additional 140 are hospitalized for near-drowning and for every hospital admission it is estimated that another 20 children are treated in hospital emergency rooms⁶.
- Alcohol use is one of the most frequently reported contributory factors associated with drowning and results in poorer supervision of children⁷.
- Inadequate supervision was found to be the most common factor associated with drownings and near-drownings⁸.
- Drownings occur more often in communities with a high number of residential pools⁹.
- In France between June and September 2003, twenty-six children between the

ages of 0 to 12 years drowned in a private swimming pool and another 74 were victims of near-drowning. In the majority of these drownings, especially those involving 0 to 5 year olds, the child could not swim and was not actively supervised at the time of the incident. Most often these incidents involved the child falling into the swimming pool.

- Data regarding drowning and near drowning incidents in Europe is limited. Detailed information regarding the circumstances of drownings and near drownings, such as how the incident occurred, location and use of protective equipment, is typically not available. Further, if near drownings do not require medical attention they do not make it into healthcare related data systems.

Prevention Effectiveness

- The most effective way to prevent drowning is to **control access to the water**.

There are multiple ways to do this:

- **Swimming pool fencing** – four-sided fencing for private pools is an excellent way to prevent a drowning event. Enclosing the pool (isolation fencing) is better than enclosing the property and the pool together. The fence should be at least 1.1 meters high without footholds and with a secure, self-closing and self-latching gate¹⁰. Ornamental iron bar fences are attractive, provide visibility and are harder for children to climb than chain-link fences that can be easily climbed by young children¹¹.
- **Pool alarms and pool covers should NOT be used in place** of a four-sided fence because they are not likely to be used appropriately and consistently. Pool covers have also found to be an additional hazard for children, as children trying to walk on a cover have submerged and were not visible, causing a delay in rescue¹².
- Swim seats are dangerous products and should not be used for learning to swim.
- **Floaters** are recommended for learning to swim because they enable the child to keep her/his balance. However, it is important to remember that buoyancy aids, not matter how "safety enhancing" they may seem, are only "aids" and that it is always necessary to monitor the children using them in water of any depth¹³.

For a complete list of facts and references, please download the *Water Wise Facts (facts on drowning)* available at <http://www.childsafetyeurope.org>.



FACTS

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- **Swimming instruction** is effective at improving swimming performance: the ability to dive, swim underwater, breathe correctly, and tread water. Swimming ability should be promoted as a necessary component of water competence, but with the understanding that swimming ability alone is not sufficient to prevent drownings¹⁴.
- **Bath seats and rings** should not be considered as a safety device and are potentially harmful¹⁶. They are intended only as bath aids to be used while washing your child. As drowning accidents with bath seats occur frequently, parents and caregivers of babies and young children should be encouraged to never leave children unsupervised while in the bathtub¹⁷.

Recommended Policy Actions

Legislation

- For the European Commission to encourage Member States to adopt legislation that requires isolation fencing on public and private swimming pools, specifying a height of fencing of at least 1.1 meters without footholds and requiring secure, self-latching gates. Legislation should cover both new pools and retrofitting of existing pools and include enforcement provisions in order to be effective^{10,11}.
- For the European Commission to adopt legislation that requires that rubber rings and arm bands that look like toys and are intended for use in the water to have a

warning label both on the packaging as well as the object itself. The label should indicate that they are only toys and do not guarantee any buoyancy in the water¹³.

- For the European Commission to adopt legislation that requires bath seats to have a warning label both on the packaging and the product itself to warn parents that bath seats are potentially harmful and to keep their children within arm's reach when using the seat¹⁵.

EU Collaboration

- For the European Commission to work with water safety experts throughout Europe to develop a standardised minimum data set for drownings in Europe that can be utilised within national data systems. The data set should include both drownings and near-drownings and information on location and circumstances of drowning including use of bath seat or flotation aids and presence of appropriate fencing if a pool related event.
- For the European Commission to support water safety experts throughout Europe in gathering together to share expertise in order to assist with the design and assessment of existing and new product devices, and other good practices to reduce childhood drowning.
- For the European Commission to support joint European level campaigning for the issue of water safety to assist in the reduction of childhood drowning and increased awareness of this risk.



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