

Rip Current Safety



Rip currents represent a real threat to beach goers, but learning about what they are, where they're likely to occur, and what to do if caught in one is an important way to prevent potential accidents.

What are rip currents?

Rip currents are powerful, channeled currents of water that flow away from shore. Although one might associate them with the beaches on the Atlantic coast where waves are generally larger, rip currents can occur at any beach with breaking waves.

Beach goers should use caution when swimming in the surf. It is reported that eighty percent of beach rescues are a result of rip currents. According to the United States Lifesaving Association (USLA), rip currents account for up to one hundred deaths annually at our nations' beaches.

How do rip currents form?

Rip currents form when waves break near the shoreline. As waves break strongly in one location and weaker in another, a circulating current is produced that travels offshore. The interaction between wave, tide, and beach conditions will affect the strength and duration of a rip current. Generally as surf conditions increase so does the likelihood of a rip current occurring.

Where are rip currents likely to occur?

Rip currents typically occur where there are breaks in sandbars or near structures such as piers, jetties, or groins. The width of and distance a rip current travels can also vary depending on surrounding environmental conditions. Some rip currents end beyond the line of breaking waves, while others can extend hundreds of yards offshore.

How can I spot a rip current?

Knowing how to identify the signs of a rip current is the first step towards a safer visit to the beach. There are several clues, but keep in mind these signs may sometimes or never be present. Look for areas with a noticeable difference in water color. Other signs can be a channel of churning, choppy



Image courtesy of Dennis Decker, WCM, NWS Melbourne, FL

Beach goers should keep a cautious eye on the water during their visit to the beach. A channel of churning, choppy water is often an indicator of a rip current.

water, or a line of foam, seaweed, or debris moving steadily offshore. Wearing polarized sunglasses will make it easier to help distinguish some of these indicators.

What should I do if I get caught in a rip current?

Never over estimate your swimming abilities. A rip current can travel up to eight feet per second, which is faster than an Olympic swimmer. Even the most experienced swimmers can be caught off guard by these swift currents. If one does find him/herself in a rip current, don't panic! Remain calm and think through the situation. Rip currents do not pull people under water; they carry them away from the shore. Most drowning deaths occur when swimmers panic, try fighting the current, and become exhausted.

If caught in a rip current, escape by swimming parallel to the shoreline. If you cannot break free, float or tread water until you are free of the current's grip and then swim back to shore away from the current. If you witness someone caught in a rip current, take caution before deciding on a rescue attempt. People have drowned while trying to save others from a rip current. Call 9-1-1 and if available, get help from a lifeguard.

As coastal populations continue to grow and visitation to beaches increase, rip currents will continue to represent a real hazard to beachgoers. As a general precaution, never swim alone and always be cautious of the water around you. To learn more, visit the National Weather Service's rip current safety website at:

<http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov/faq.shtml>.

RIP CURRENTS
Break the Grip of the Rip!

ESCAPE ESCAPE
ESCAPE ESCAPE
CURRENT RIP CURRENT CURRENT

Rip currents are powerful currents of water moving away from shore. They can sweep even the strongest swimmer out to sea.

IF CAUGHT IN A RIP CURRENT

- ◆ Don't fight the current
- ◆ Swim out of the current, then to shore
- ◆ If you can't escape, float or tread water
- ◆ If you need help, call or wave for assistance

SAFETY

- ◆ Know how to swim
- ◆ Never swim alone
- ◆ If in doubt, don't go out

More information about rip currents can be found at the following web sites:
www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov
www.usla.org

Bryan Fluech
Collier County Sea Grant Extension Agent
(239) 417-6310 x204
fluech@ufl.edu

Solutions for your Life

The Extension Service is an off-campus branch of the University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences and department with the Public Services Division of Collier County Government. Extension programs are open to all persons without regard to race, color, creed, sex, age, handicap, or national origin. In compliance with ADA requirements, participants with special needs can be reasonably accommodated by contacting the Extension Service at least 10 working days prior to the meeting. Contact Extension at (239) 353-4244 or by fax at (239) 353-7127.