



COMMISSIONER'S COMMENTS



Swimming Precautions for All This Summer, Including the Young and Fit

Summertime is here and that means hot weather, picnics and countless other ways to enjoy the great outdoors. One summer favorite is swimming. Whether you are relaxing by the pool or by the lake, there are important safety precautions everyone should take, regardless of age or swimming ability.

Every day about ten people drown in the U.S. according to the Centers for Disease Control, and Putnam County has had its share of tragedies. One in five drowning deaths on average are among children 14 years and younger, and Putnam County has had three drowning deaths of children since 2010. It is not just the fatalities however, because for each death there are five more drowning victims who are treated in the emergency room and hospitalized, often with brain damage and long-term disabilities, memory and learning problems, and even loss of basic functioning.

What can be done? Actually, a lot. These deaths are preventable for the most part. Number one is supervision, adequate supervision. With young children “touch supervision” is needed which requires someone physically close enough to reach the child at all times. Drowning occurs quickly and silently, so supervising adults should not be reading, talking on the phone or otherwise distracted. With our youngest residents, remember that drowning can occur in shallow water.

Older children should use and practice the buddy system. It is not enough just to pair up with each other. The Boy Scouts, who advocate and follow this practice, advise staying close to your buddy and always knowing what he is doing at all times. Of course, no one should go in the water alone. It is always best to select swimming sites with lifeguards and swim in familiar bodies of water. Open, unfamiliar water such as a lake, river or ocean, presents many unknown and unsafe conditions. Tranquil lakes, of which Putnam has many, are especially deceiving since what lurks below the surface is obscured from view, making hazards unknown and rescues all the more difficult.

The Putnam County Department of Health is charged with insuring our public swimming areas are safe for all patrons. The NYS Sanitary Code dictates a number of measures such as certified life guards and proper safety equipment, pool disinfection levels and beach bacteria levels, beach slope inclines and cautionary signs. We enforce these regulations because there is no compromise where safety is concerned. These regulated areas offer your best choice for safety.

On one final note, another risky activity has the attention of public health officials. Dangerous underwater breath-holding behaviors, referred to as DUBBS, were the subject of recent research. Sixteen such fatalities occurred in New York State from 1988 to 2011, including two highly qualified adult swimmers in good health, training for an advanced military fitness test. It involves deliberate hyperventilation before underwater swimming and breath-holding contest participation, which leads to blackout and drowning. It occurs most commonly among males, 15 to 24 years old.

So spread the word, stay alert and informed, and have a great summer!

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