

Water safety

Drowning is one of the leading causes of injury-related death for children under 5 years of age in Canada. Children can drown in as little as 2.5 cm (1 inch) of water. Many of these tragedies happen in backyard pools without 4-side pool fencing and self-closing, self-latching safety gates, or in a context where supervising adults were distracted.

For rural and remote living children, lakes and rivers serve as transportation routes as well as sources of recreation. Regardless of whether found in nature or in a backyard, caution needs to be practiced around water.

Take the following essential precautions to help protect your children:

- **Babies** who can't sit without support and are too young to wear a portable flotation device (PFD) should always be held by an adult.
- **Toddlers** should always be within arm's reach of an adult when they are in or around water. This includes pools, bathtubs, beaches, and other water sources.
- **All children** should be supervised by an adult when they are in or around water and should never be left alone in a pool or bathtub, even for a moment. The presence of other children does not prevent drowning, as they may not recognize the signs of drowning, or react quickly enough to get help immediately.
- The Lifesaving Society recommends a supervision ratio of at least 1 adult for every 2 young children, and 1 adult for every baby.
- Swimming lessons are a great opportunity for families to participate in fun activities that contribute to a healthy lifestyle. But on their own, they will not protect or prevent a child from drowning.

Should I use a lifejacket or a personal flotation device

(PFD) for my child?

Lifejackets are different from PFDs. A **lifejacket** holds the person wearing it upright and it can turn the person over from face-down to face-up. A **PFD** will keep a person floating, but not necessarily face-up. It is lighter and less bulky than a lifejacket. PFDs also keep people warmer in the water because the foam in the vest is spread more evenly around the body. You can use either a lifejacket or a PFD for your child, as long as it is designed for children.

- In Canada, approved lifejackets and PFDs are not available for infants who weigh less than 9 kg (20 lb). There is no safety standard for smaller infants.
- PFDs or lifejackets should be worn by all infants who weigh at least 9 kg (20 lb) and by toddlers who are swimming or playing near or in the water.
- Check the label to be sure that your child's PFD or lifejacket meets current national safety standards. It should be approved by at least one of the following: Transport Canada, Canadian Coast Guard or Fisheries and Oceans Canada.
- It should be the right size for your child's weight. Make sure it stays buckled. Keep all safety straps fastened, including the crotch strap.
- Remember that water wings, neck rings, bathing suits with flotation devices in them, and other swim toys **ARE NOT** safety devices.

What should we do if we have a swimming pool at home?

- Backyard pools—whether in- or above-ground—should be fenced on 4 sides. That means NOT having direct access to a pool from a deck, patio or back door (the house doesn't count as a "side"). The fence should be climbing-resistant and at least 1.2 m (4 ft) high. Any gate to the pool area should be self-closing and self-latching.
- Hot tubs not contained within the fenced pool area should have a locking hard cover or be in an area that can be closed and locked.
- Empty toddler/portable backyard pools after use (at least once daily if you are using them every day). By not having standing water, you also help reduce the risk of mosquito spread illnesses.
- Parents and pool owners should learn how to swim and how to rescue a drowning victim. They should also maintain certification in first aid and cardiopulmonary

resuscitation (CPR). Pool owners should have an emergency action plan, rescue equipment, and access to a phone on the deck or poolside.

- Slides or play equipment should be designed specifically for pool use.

What are some other water safety tips?

- Use diapers designed for use in water. They don't get as heavy as regular diapers and are less likely to cause your child to lose their balance in a wading pool.
- Empty buckets and pails, ice chests with melted ice, or bathtubs as soon as you are done with them. Do not keep a container filled with water (such as a rain barrel) around your home unless the container is child resistant.
- Keep children away from ponds and streams at any time of year, unless you are with them. Be extra cautious with fast currents that occur during spring runoff and after heavy down pours.

When can my child take swimming lessons?

Some organizations offer ability-based classes that are 'unparented' as young as 3 years of age, but several studies show that children do not have the skills to swim on their own until they are at least 4 years old, even if they start lessons at a younger age. Children won't really become competent swimmers until age 6 or 7.

If your child is younger than 4 years old, look for swimming programs that focus on building water confidence and that teach parents about water safety. This is a great way to have fun and be active with your child.

Remember that swimming lessons alone cannot prevent drowning.

Additional resources

- Choosing lifejackets and personal flotation devices (Transport Canada)
(<https://www.tc.gc.ca/en/services/marine/getting-started-safe-boating/choosing-lifejackets-personal-flotation-devices.html>)
- Drowning (Parachute)
(<https://www.parachutecanada.org/en/injury-topic/drowning/>)

Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Injury Prevention Committee

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