

Childhood Water Safety

- Drowning is a major cause of death and disability in the world¹ and is the second leading cause of injury death for children of the European Union. More than 70% of the victims are boys and the most vulnerable are children one to four years of age².
- 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. The estimated time that a child who has drowned was noted to be missing was usually less than 5 minutes and in a swimming pool drowning, no caregiver has ever reported hearing a splash, even when the caregiver was by the poolside³.
- In the United Kingdom more children died in pools abroad while on vacation than in the United Kingdom and more than half of those who drowned could in fact swim⁴.
- For every child who drowned in the Netherlands, an additional 140 were hospitalized for near-drowning; for every hospital admission, approximately 20 children are treated in hospital emergency rooms each year⁵.
- Alcohol use is one of the most frequently reported contributory factors associated with drowning and causes poorer supervision of children⁶.
- Inadequate supervision was found to be the most common factor associated with drownings and near-drownings⁷.
- Drownings occur more often in communities with a high number of residential pools⁸.
- In France between June and September 2003, seventy-four children between the ages of 0 to 12 were victims of near-drowning in a private swimming pool while another 26 drowned in a private swimming pool. In the majority of these drownings the child could not swim and was under no supervision, especially for the 0 to 5 year old children. The cause was most often a fall into the water. One girl was intentionally drowned in a private pool⁹.

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 fenced private pools are 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 scaled 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. Yet it is important to remember that buoyancy aids, however “safety enhancing” they may seem, are only “aids” and that it is always necessary to monitor the children using them when in water of all depths¹³.
- 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.

Recommended Policy Actions

Legislation:

- For the European Commission to adopt legislation that requires isolation fencing, specifying the height of the fencing and require secure, self-latching gates.
- For the European Commission to adopt legislation that also requires retrofitting of existing pools and include enforcement provisions in order to be effective.

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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- For the European Commission to adopt legislation that requires rubber rings and arm bands that look like toys to have a warning label that should be on the packaging as well as the object itself indicating that they are indeed toys which do not guarantee any buoyancy in the water¹³.
- For the European Commission to adopt legislation that requires bath seats have a vigilance pictogram on the product itself to warn parents to keep their children within arm's reach when using the seat¹⁵.

EU Collaboration:

- For the European Commission to create, update, and maintain surveillance databases of drownings in Europe. These databases should include near-drownings,

information on circumstances of drowning, location, use of bath seat, nationality of victims, number of private and public pools, fencing types, and regulations throughout the EU.

- For the European Commission to support water safety experts throughout Europe to gather together and 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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