

Drowning Prevention Talking Points

For Law Enforcement, Fire Officials, EMS, and Water Safety Partners



We all have a part to play in water safety. Recent events and weather have us on high alert!

Every year, we see preventable tragedy on the water. In King County, 17 people died in preventable drownings in 2015.*

Public Health – Seattle & King County has created these updated talking points for you to use when communicating with the public and media about drowning prevention. If you have questions, please contact Tony Gomez, Violence and Injury Prevention Manager for Public Health at 206-263-8178, Tony.Gomez@kingcounty.gov or James Apa, Communications Manager, at 206-263-8698, James.Apa@kingcounty.gov.

Key Messages

Drowning is a preventable tragedy and an important public health and public safety issue. With snowpack's exceeding normal levels this year, rivers will be cold, fast, deep, and often deadly as the snow melts in spring and early summer. Warm weather draws people to lakes, rivers and salt water areas, creating high risk situations for themselves, others and rescuers. The safest decision may be to not enter the water. Swimmers and other water recreationists should follow these recommendations to prevent drownings:

Know the risks: Washington waters are cold enough to cause your muscles to not work, even on the hottest summer day. Cold water can weaken even the strongest swimmer.

- King County rivers are extremely cold, fast-moving and dangerous, especially with this year's melting snowpack.
- The safest decision may be to not enter the water. Think about the risks when swimming, boating, inner tubing, or rafting in rivers due to dangers from currents, logs, log jams, and cold temperatures.
- If you do enter our rivers, wear a life jacket.
- Raft the rivers with a professional guide that knows how to be safe on the river.
- Obey all safety signs and warning flags.

Learn to swim, including water safety and survival skills: To enjoy the water safely, learn swim strokes, water safety and survival skills, and becoming comfortable in the water. This is a good time of year for this!

- Learn to float and tread water for at least 10 minutes. Many pools in the King County area offer scholarships for swim lessons.
- Drowning often happens when inexperienced or weaker swimmers try to keep up with more experienced ones. Have conversations with your children and teens about swimming risks.

Wear a lifejacket: Always wear a U.S. Coast Guard approved lifejacket when boating, tubing, rafting, swimming or other activities in or on lakes, rivers, salt water, or pools without a lifeguard.

- Infants and children should always wear lifejackets when in or near open water.
- Air-filled or foam toys, such as "water wings," "noodles," or inner-tubes are not a substitute for wearing a U.S. Coast Guard approved lifejacket. Check the label!
- By law, children 12 years old and younger must wear a U.S. Coast Guard approved life jacket at all times in a moving vessel less than 19 feet in length, unless in a fully enclosed area. You can borrow a lifejacket from a lifejacket loaner stations at these locations:

<https://maps.google.com/maps/ms?msid=202693340322335123734.0004c5abb90ed2aabb52d&msa=0>

Swim where there's a lifeguard: Swim in areas with lifeguards. Many beaches in King County don't have lifeguards until mid to late June, so wear a lifejacket while swimming in those areas in the meantime.

Supervise children in or near water: Always provide close and constant attention to children you are supervising in or near water.

- Avoid all distractions while supervising, including texting, reading, cooking, socializing, etc. Stay within touching distance of young children at all times.
- Have adults take turns watching children at social events.
- Set and follow safety rules.
- Swim in areas with lifeguards when possible.

Do not use alcohol or drugs during water activities: Never use alcohol or other impairing drugs during water and boating activities or while supervising children around the water. Alcohol affects balance, coordination, and judgement. Exposure to sun and heat worsen these effects.

Learn first aid and CPR: Learn first aid and CPR. Full CPR, which combines chest compressions and breaths, is best for a drowning person. Seconds count—the more quickly lifesaving CPR is started, the better the chances of recovery. Dial 911 in an emergency.

Quick Statistics

King County

- In 2015, Public Health – Seattle & King County found that 17 people died in preventable drowning incidents. Of these, 12 (70%) took place in open water, such as rivers, lakes, ponds, or Puget Sound.
 - Of the 12 open water deaths, nine (75%), may have been prevented with lifejacket use.
 - Half (52%) of all King County deaths over the last five years involved alcohol and/or other drugs.
- *King County 2015 drowning statistics are preliminary and will be made final later in the summer.

Washington State

- In 2014, there were 98 unintentional drowning deaths of Washington residents. 16 of these deaths were children and young adults under 20 years old.
- Drowning continues to be second leading cause of unintentional injury death for children and teens age 1-17 in Washington.

For more information, visit Public Health's Water Safety webpages at:

www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/injury/water