



# Drowning

## National Statistics

Drowning is a one of the leading causes of unintentional death for Australian children. Statistics from *Australia's National Drowning Report* by the Royal Life Saving Society of Australia shows that in 2017/2018:

### Children 0-4 years

**18 CHILDREN DROWNED.**  
Drownings in swimming pools accounted for 67% of these deaths.<sup>1</sup>

### Children 5-14 years

**9 CHILDREN DROWNED.**  
Lakes/dams/lagoons (22%), the beach (22%), and bathtubs/spa baths (22%) were the leading locations for drowning incidents among this age group.<sup>1</sup>

Non-fatal drowning incidents are also a cause of concern as they can result in long term effects such as brain damage and permanent disability. Statistics from the Royal Life Saving Society of Australia show that on average for children under 5 years of age there are more than 7 non-fatal drowning incidents for every drowning death.<sup>2</sup>

## Why children are at risk

Children are adventurous and enjoy exploring their environments. They are often attracted to water but have little understanding of the danger that it poses. The physical build of young children also places them at risk as they are 'top heavy' and prone to falling into water due to a lack of balance.

Drowning can occur quickly and silently - 20 seconds and a few centimetres of water is all it takes for a toddler to drown. It's not only large bodies of water, such as pools and the beach that put children at risk; baths, ponds, buckets, eskies, pet's drinking bowls and other small bodies of water are also drowning hazards. Paddling or playing in flood waters has also resulted in drowning incidents.

## Common causes – how and when

### Children 0-4 years

- Swimming pools are the most common location for toddler drownings making up 67% of all cases followed by bathtubs which account for 22%.
- Children falling into water account for 78% of drownings.
- Evidence suggests that a large number of drowning deaths in backyard pools are a result of pool barriers that are faulty or non compliant with Australian standards and the absence of active adult supervision.<sup>3</sup>

**20 SECONDS AND A FEW CENTIMETRES OF WATER IS ALL IT TAKES FOR A CHILD TO DROWN.**

## Children 5-14 years

- Lakes/dams/lagoons (22%), the beach (22%) and baths/spa baths (22%) were the most common locations for drowning among this age group.
- Swimming and recreation was the most common activity being undertaken at the time of the drowning incidents, accounting for 56% of all deaths in this age group.
- Under-estimating the strength of currents and over-estimating swimming ability are common mistakes for this age group.

## Key messages for prevention<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Supervision

- ★ Keep a constant watch on your children around the water and don't be distracted by your phone.
- ★ Active adult supervision involves focusing all of your attention on children at all times, when they are in, on or around the water. Do not expect older children to look after their younger siblings. Children have short attention spans and can be easily distracted.
- ★ Remain within arm's reach of toddlers to ensure you can get to the child in time if something goes wrong.
- ★ Older children still need to be supervised by an adult who is ready to enter the water in case of an emergency.
- ★ Always take children with you if you leave the water area.

### 2. Reduce the hazard

- ★ Use safety barriers, such as pool barriers, to restrict access to water.
- ★ Remove hazards such as pot plants and chairs from pool barriers to prevent children climbing on to them and over the barrier.

- ★ Do not prop any doors or gates open as this may allow children access to a body of water.
- ★ Create a safe play area to separate children from bodies of water such as swimming pools and dams. This is especially important on farms and larger properties as very young children have been known to follow family pets to water over very long distances.
- ★ Regularly inspect and maintain your pool barrier and gate to ensure that it is working properly. Weather conditions and general wear and tear can affect the performance of your pool barrier.

### 3. Knowledge/water awareness

- ★ Water familiarisation lessons can assist in teaching children to swim while also helping them understand water safety

### 4. Resuscitation

- ★ Learn CPR and update your skills regularly so that you are prepared in the event of an emergency.
- ★ Resuscitation posters are a good reminder to keep around pools and spas.

Kidsafe is here to assist you. This information is of a general nature. If you require specific advice please contact us to discuss further.

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## References and links

1. Royal Life Saving Society Australia. National Drowning Report 2018. [https://www.royallifesaving.com.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/23197/RLS\\_NDR2018\\_ReportLR.pdf](https://www.royallifesaving.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/23197/RLS_NDR2018_ReportLR.pdf)
2. Mahony, A, Barnsley, P, Peden, AE, Scarr, J (2017) A thirteen year national study of non-fatal drowning in Australia: Data challenges, hidden impacts and social costs, Royal Life Saving Society – Australia. Sydney.
3. Royal Life Saving Society Australia. National Drowning Report 2016. [https://www.royallifesaving.com.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/18085/RLS\\_NDR2016\\_ReportLR.pdf](https://www.royallifesaving.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/18085/RLS_NDR2016_ReportLR.pdf)
4. Royal Life Saving Society Australia. Keep Watch. <http://www.royallifesaving.com.au/programs/keep-watch-toddler-drowning-prevention-program>