

What You Need to Know About Rip Currents



Rip currents, commonly called rip tides, and erroneously called undertows, affect many of the surf areas along North Carolina coasts, and pose a life threatening situation to the unsuspecting beach goers. Though storms make them stronger, they really only need a steady, fresh breeze blowing perpendicular to the shore to stir them up.

A rip current is a strong surface current of water flowing out past the surf zone that can pull the strongest swimmer into deeper water. Most deaths occur when people caught in the current try to swim toward the shore directly against the current; they become totally exhausted and drown. Many times would-be-rescuers are also caught and drowned.

Rip Currents are normally 10 to 30 yards wide, and the best escape from them, especially for the weak or non-swimmer, is to wade or swim parallel to the beach. The rip current weakens rapidly only a relatively short distance seaward of the sandbar that creates them. Another means of escape is to float with the current beyond the breakers, then swim shoreward at an angle away from the current.

A person can recognize a rip current in the surf zone by such characteristics as a discoloration of the water that extends in a bank offshore, or a foam or seaweed streak extending seaward from the breakers.

Rip Currents can occur at any time of the year, but the majority of deaths occur from May to August when the combination of a large number of bathers and favorable wind conditions coincide. Many victims are tourists who are unfamiliar with surf conditions. However, local residents are also at risk. The old and the young and the non-swimmer are particularly susceptible.

Rip Current Preparedness

- Learn how to swim. Many non-swimmers become victims while wading in the surf.
- Do not overestimate your swimming ability and take chances.
- Do not get caught in a rip current trying to save someone else. Throw them a flotation device and immediately seek help from others.
- If caught in a rip current, swim parallel to the beach. Then swim back towards shore at a right angle from the current. Do not attempt to swim against the rip current.

Weather Service Web Sites

National Weather Service Web sites provide the latest rip current forecasts. Sites are updated twice daily and maps show if conditions along the beach pose a low, increased, or dangerous threat. Follow the link for "local threats" located on the left side of the web page.

For Onslow County forecasts, visit:

<http://www.nws.noaa.gov/er/mhx>

For more information on rip currents, go to

<http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov>.