

Stay safe on the water, part one

Warmer weather means people flocking to lakes and rivers in droves to enjoy some fishing or time on the boat. But something as simple as the wrong type of footwear can lead to an injury that ruins your day and maybe even your life.

In 2023, the [United States Coast Guard](#) reported 3,844 instances of something going wrong on a boat and 564 boating deaths. The numbers were down from 2022 and don't capture what's happening on *every* waterway in America. But they're still worth paying attention to.

[Bethany Huelskoetter](#), APRN, a family medicine provider at OSF HealthCare, knows a thing or two in this area of medicine, having treated patients for outdoor injuries for years, plus spending leisure time on the water.

- Entanglements in boat engines: Contacting the parts under the boat can lead to traumatic injuries and even limb loss. Huelskoetter has heard of instances where a boat driver unknowingly backs up into a swimmer's midsection.

"Make people aware of where the motor is, and tell them not to swim there," Huelskoetter says. "Don't put your feet on the boat's propellor. It can be sharp and injure you. And if the driver is going to move the boat, they should know where everyone is."

- Head injuries: Diving into water where you don't know the depth is a big no. There can also be objects like logs, Huelskoetter says.

"People can go down and not come back up," Huelskoetter warns. "They hit their head, and it knocks them unconscious. And maybe there's a current underwater that they're unable to fight."

- Slip and falls: Wet surfaces, like a dock or the back of a boat, make you prone to falls. First, Huelskoetter says to enter the boat in the right spot. That's usually the back or the side. Don't try to hop over a tall railing, for example. Second, find a good non-slip footwear that works for you. That could be a sandal or a specialized boat shoe. Huelskoetter says going barefoot can be OK, too, if you watch where you walk. Look for sharp objects, and avoid long contact with hot surfaces.
- The buddy system: Try to boat or fish with someone. They can help you if you have an emergency. If you're alone, let people know your plans. Then if you're not back when you planned to be, they can alert law enforcement to look for you.
- Fish hook impalements: It's a tiny object. How bad can it be?

Bad, Huelskoetter says. The hooks are dirty, so infections are possible.

"If you can cut the [fishing line] string and come to an urgent care or your primary care provider, that's fantastic," Huelskoetter says. "But if you're unable, push the hook the rest of the way through [the wound]. Then cut the barb on the end of the hook off. If you go fishing, have wire cutters with you in case this happens. Then you can slide the hook out."

"Wash with soap and water, then keep the wound dry and covered. Antibiotic ointment is good to use," Huelskoetter adds. "Follow up with your primary care provider in the following few days if it develops redness, soreness or anything else irregular. We expect it to be tender, but if you have redness, swelling, drainage or if you're just unsure, contact your primary care provider."

Huelskoetter points out that you can usually send a photo to your provider via your online patient portal. Then the provider can advise what to do.

Getting help

If someone suffers a minor injury on the water, you can treat it with a first aid kit until you return home. If it's a major injury like a concussion, gently move the person out of the water and onto a flat surface. Gentle movements are critical to prevent further injury like paralysis. Call 9-1-1 and meet first responders on land. A charged phone is crucial for a day outdoors, but signal can lack in rural areas. So it never hurts to have a global positioning system (GPS) device, too.