

"You're never going to be stronger than the ocean."

A wave of caution from [Jon Gehlbach](#), MD, the medical director of the Pediatric Critical Care Unit at OSF HealthCare Children's Hospital of Illinois.

The [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) (NOAA) reports around 30,000 swimmers have to be saved from rip currents by lifeguards each year, while about 100 people drown after encountering them.

## What is a rip current?

[Rip currents](#) are powerful, narrow channels of fast-moving water. Many summer vacationers travel to the East, West and Gulf Coasts in the summer, where rip currents are prevalent. But some may not know that rip currents are also known to occur on the shores of the Great Lakes. Rip currents are when the waves hit the beach in a certain way, creating a current that flows away from the beach, according to NOAA.

Dr. Gehlbach says whatever you do, don't try to swim against the rip current.

"Familiarize yourself with where the rip currents are. They're usually well-marked (with signs on the beach)," Dr. Gehlbach says. "You don't have to worry about currents or underwater debris in pools, but in oceans, most drownings are related to rip currents. It's an invisible current pulling people away from the shore. The urge is to swim against it, but if you find yourself in that situation, try to swim parallel to the shore and get out of that rip current as safely as you can."

## "Break the grip of the rip"

"Wave, yell, swim parallel" is another slogan NOAA has. Make sure to continue to breathe, keep your head above water and don't spend your energy fighting against the current. While rip currents typically flow at one to two feet per second, they can reach up to eight feet per second, or five miles per hour.

While waves or storms can change the shape of the ocean bottom, NOAA reports rip currents are actually the strongest at low tide.

Maybe the beach isn't your thing, but the lake is. Similar messaging applies. Dr. Gehlbach says there are many unknown factors in natural bodies of water like lakes and rivers that make them more dangerous.

"They tend to be darker, so it's harder to see what's going on below the surface. They could have hidden obstacles," Dr. Gehlbach says. "Currents play a factor as well. Kids might be great swimmers in the pool, but currents make it a lot more challenging to swim safely."

## Rip currents aren't the same as undertow

Rip currents are much more dangerous, NOAA says. They flow on the surface of water, are usually very strong and can go far out from the shore. Undertow happens when water sinks downhill into the sea after a wave carried it uphill, which is mostly the case at beaches with steep inclines.

## When in doubt, don't go out!

NOAA has the following tips to remain safe on your beach vacations this summer.

- Swim with a buddy
- Swim near a lifeguard
- Learn how to spot a rip current
- Be prepared

Keep an eye on the local National Weather Service (NWS) Surf Zone Forecasts and Rip Current Statements online and on social media. This can give you a good gauge of what the water's like before heading to the beach.

## **Swimsuit color safety**

While some parents spend more time than others picking out their kids' swim outfits, Dr. Gehlbach says the color of their swimsuit could be extremely important in dangerous situations.

"With those blue hues or lighter colors, you might be able to see them well on the surface of the water, but they don't contrast well with the color of the water, especially pool water, once they go below the surface. Look for things that are brightly colored. Your pinks, reds, oranges, and even black can contrast well against the water," Dr. Gehlbach says.