

# Water Safety USA

## Water Competency — A key water safety concept

**WHAT:** Water competency means being able to anticipate, avoid, and survive common drowning situations, as well as being able to recognize and provide assistance to those in need. It includes water safety awareness, basic swimming skills, and helping others.

**WHY:** Drowning is a major cause of accidental death. Drowning is a surprisingly fast, often silent injury. A weak or non-swimmer who stumbles and loses footing when unable to touch the bottom, can quickly start to drown. The person who is in trouble cannot move a few feet to safety and is unable to call for help. They may sink out of sight within seconds. Rescue needs to happen quickly so that the person can breathe and survive without brain damage. Fortunately, drowning situations can be avoided with good planning and being prepared.

Good swimmers are generally at less risk of serious mishaps in the water than poor swimmers, but even a good swimmer can drown. Preventing surprise and panic requires learning what to do before getting into the water. Many drownings involve people who did not plan to enter the water. Even when they plan to enter the water, many people underestimate the risks and overestimate their ability, or that of their children in water.<sup>1,2</sup> Those completing entry-level swim lessons, particularly young children, may still not have the basic skills and knowledge for water competency. They still need close and direct supervision. Even those with good swimming skills may not be safe due to other factors, such as unfamiliar waters, water hazards, medical emergencies, alcohol or drug use, or other unsafe conditions.

**WATER SMARTS:** There is more to drowning prevention than swimming skills. Water safety is knowing about the water and the hazards in it and about having respect for the water. A person can learn to recognize and avoid some common water hazards like rip currents at beaches that carry a swimmer away from shore and underwater dangers like logs or sea life that sting, bite, snag, or trap swimmers. Water safety is also practicing safe behaviors and stopping unsafe behaviors, like horseplay or diving headfirst into shallow water that can lead to spinal injuries, or consuming alcohol or drugs that can affect judgement, swimming ability, and physical reaction. Water safety includes understanding the layers of protection needed to keep ourselves and our loved ones safer when in, on, and around water. For example, wearing a U.S. Coast Guard approved life jacket appropriate for their weight and water activity, and putting one on a weak or non-swimmer swimmer, adds a layer of protection. Water competency includes having sufficient knowledge to be responsible for one's own safety as well as the safety of everyone you are supervising. Parents and caregivers should gain basic water safety knowledge and then set rules, coach their children, and closely supervise those not old enough to recognize and avoid hazards, dangerous situations, and risky behaviors.

**SWIMMING SKILLS:** Essential swimming skills include being able to enter the water and resurface, controlling breathing, floating, turning, and moving to safety in the water and exiting. However, the water environment, the activity, and even what the person is wearing can alter their ability to perform these skills. Basic swimming skills may be adequate to swim a short time and distance in the deep end of a swimming pool, but greater skill and comfort in the water are needed when swimming in a lake, river, or ocean; in cold or rough water; and in waves or current. The table below provides swimmers and parents with some reasonable guidelines to assess basic water competency and skills to look for when evaluating a swim lesson and water safety program. These swim skills should be seen as a foundation for gaining more experience and comfort in the water.

The American Red Cross recommendations for water competency<sup>3,4</sup> provide a starting point for assessing minimum swim skills for common pool environments. Those are included in the middle column of the table below, including the minimum proficiency to control breathing, float or tread water, turn in the water, and swim 25 yards using any type of stroke. Anyone lacking such basic skill levels should be closely supervised, stay in shallow water, or wear a life jacket, and seek instruction. A person just able to meet the American Red Cross criteria for water competency is still a novice, not a good swimmer and may not yet be ready for instruction or participation in various activities in different water environments beyond pools such as snorkeling, wakeboarding, surfing, or assisting with in-water rescues. Advanced skills are generally best acquired through specialized courses and may not be included in generic learn-to-swim progressions.

**HELPING OTHERS:** Everyone should always swim with general supervision such as lifeguards and water watchers.<sup>5</sup> Children without basic swimming skills should be directly supervised by a water watcher who is within arm’s reach. Knowledgeable, attentive, supervision of all swimmers is important for drowning prevention and response, particularly for toddlers, children, and teens, even when lifeguards are on duty. Supervision may be provided by designated water watchers such as parents and youth leaders who are alert, not distracted (reading, using a smart device or phone), not using alcohol or drugs, and focused on those near or in the water. Ideally, water watchers themselves should be fully water competent, knowing safe, simple rescue techniques.

Safe, simple rescue techniques include reaching and throwing a flotation aid from the water’s edge without entering the water. However, more skills may be needed to aid someone in trouble in the water. A toddler, or anyone else, on the bottom of a backyard pool needs immediate help from someone trained to safely enter the water, submerge to the victim, remove the victim from the water, and perform CPR. A victim struggling after stepping off a hidden ledge in a lake may be beyond reaching or easy throwing distance from shore. A competent swimmer with appropriate training should be able to safely wade or swim close enough to the victim to push a flotation aid for them to grab. Rescue and first aid skills are especially important for parents whose children swim in backyard pools or recreate in other aquatic settings where lifeguards are not present.

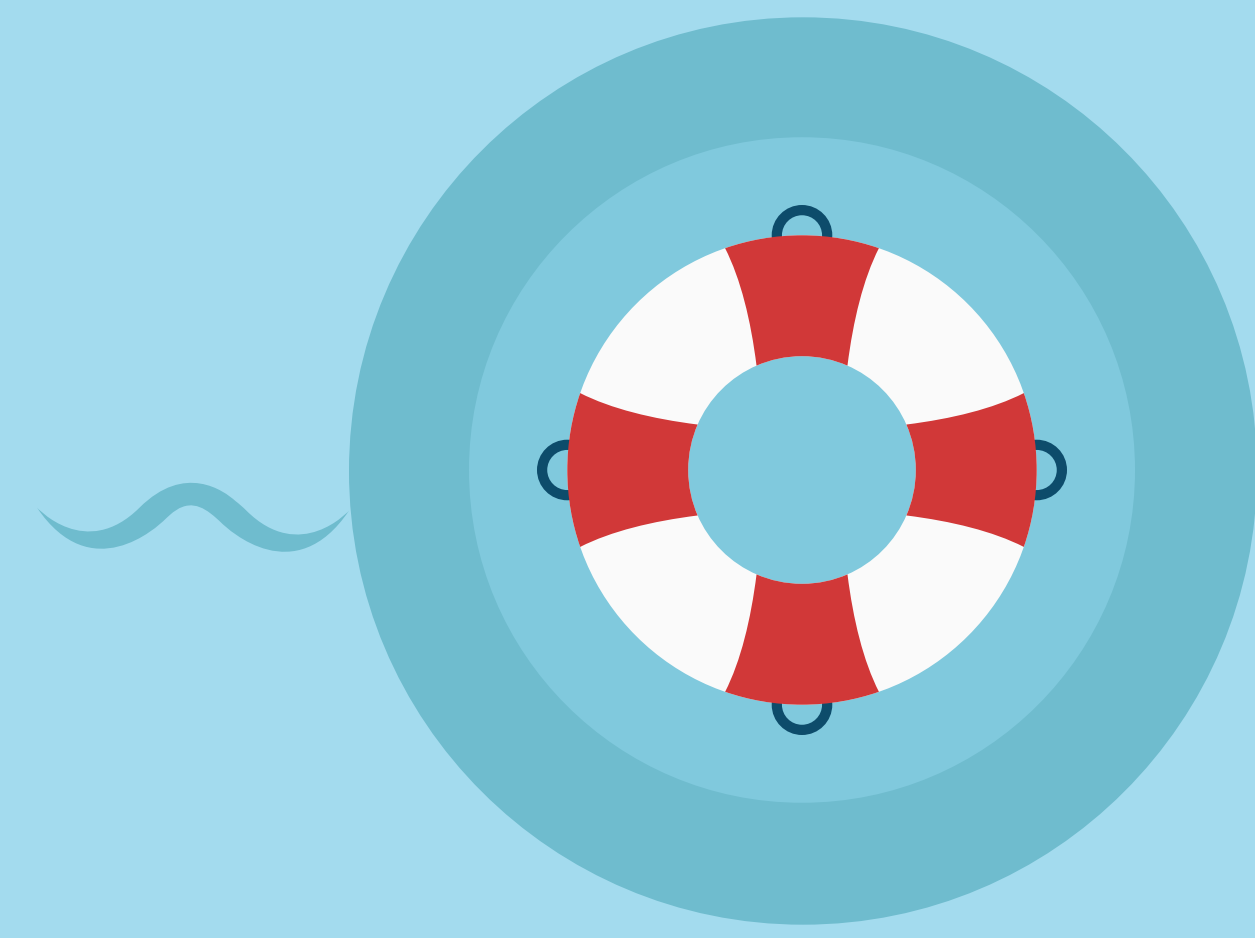
### **WATER COMPETENCY COMPONENTS**

- | <b>WATER SMARTS</b>   | <b>SWIMMING SKILLS</b>   | <b>HELPING OTHERS</b>   |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know your limitations: respect the water and avoid unsafe behaviors</li> <li>• Never swim alone, swim with lifeguards and/or water watchers present</li> <li>• Swim only in a safe area, free from underwater hazards, including drop-offs, with safe entry and exit points</li> <li>• Do not dive into shallow or unclear water; enter feet first.</li> <li>• Wear a U.S. Coast Guard approved life jacket while boating, regardless of swimming skill</li> <li>• Understand how physical fitness, medical conditions, and cold water change risk factors</li> <li>• Do not swim while using alcohol or drugs</li> <li>• Understand the dangers of hyperventilation and hypoxic blackout<sup>7</sup></li> <li>• Understand how currents affect swimming in a river</li> <li>• Know how to recognize, avoid, and handle ocean rip currents</li> <li>• Know how to call for help</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Step or jump into water over the head and return to the surface</li> <li>• Turn around and orient to safety as well as turn over</li> <li>• Float or tread water</li> <li>• Combine breath control with all swim skills, including forward movement in the water                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic skill: swim to safety for at least 25 yards*</li> <li>• Advanced skill: Swim at least 100 yards using relaxed, restful strokes *</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Exit the water</li> <li>• Perform all the skills above while clothed</li> </ul> <p style="margin-top: 10px;">*Note: Longer distances and length of times are necessary for competency in different water environments</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Always provide close and constant attention to anyone (children, teens, &amp; adults) you are supervising in or near the water.</li> <li>• Know how to recognize a drowning person</li> <li>• Learn SAFE ways to assist others who are in trouble</li> <li>• Learn CPR (both chest compressions &amp; rescue breaths) and first aid</li> </ul> |

1. Keeping Kids Safe In and Around Water – Exploring Misconceptions that Lead to Drowning. July 2016, Safe Kids Worldwide [www.safekids.org/water-safety](http://www.safekids.org/water-safety)
2. Quan L, Bennett E, Moran K, Bierens J. Use of a consensus-based process to develop international guidelines to decrease recreational open water drowning deaths. *International Journal of Health Promotion and Education*. 50(3) (2012): 135-144.
3. Scientific Advisory Council Answers – Water Competency. <https://www.instructorcorner.org/s/science>
4. What is Water Competency? American Red Cross- YouTube [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOcSRv2Xj5s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOcSRv2Xj5s)
5. Simple Safety Steps Series: Never leave a child unattended in or near the water. January 17, 2017, U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission [www.poolsafely.gov/simple-safety-steps-series-never-leave-a-child-unattended-in-or-near-the-water/](http://www.poolsafely.gov/simple-safety-steps-series-never-leave-a-child-unattended-in-or-near-the-water/)



# Water Competence



Become water competent to be safer on, in, or near water this summer

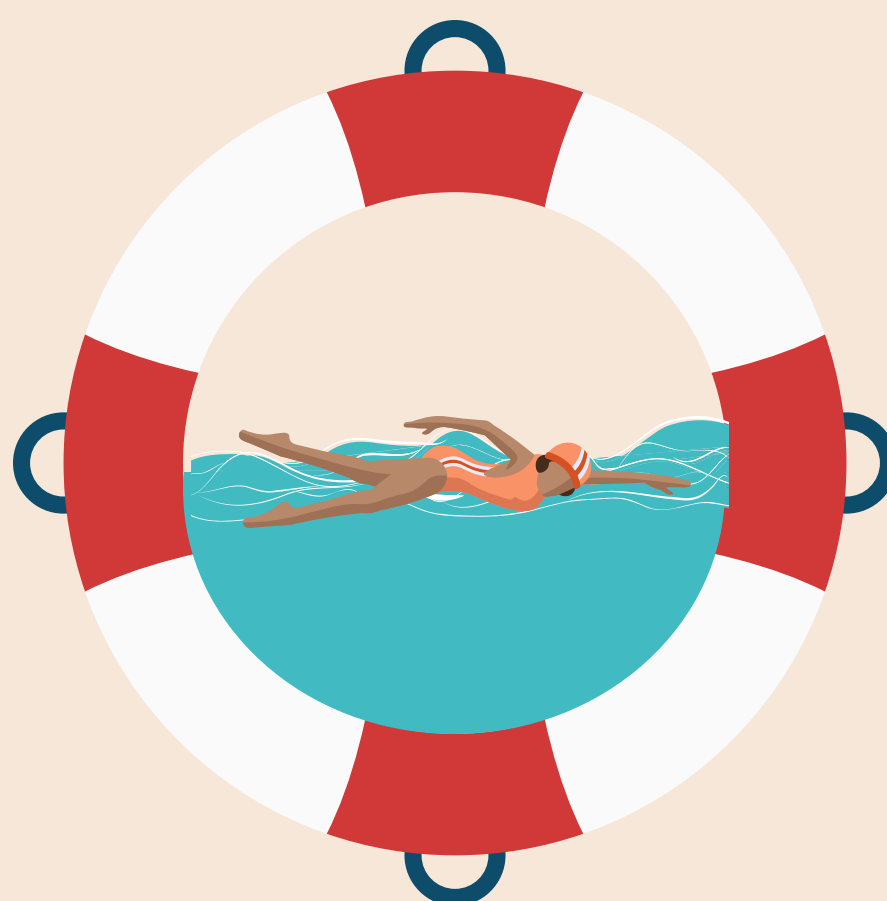
## 3 Elements of Water Competence

Why is water competence important? Drowning is a major cause of accidental death, partly because many people underestimate the risks and overestimate their ability, or that of their children, in water.



### Water Smarts

...means knowing your limitations, swimming in safe areas, knowing how to handle common water hazards, & wearing a life jacket



### Water Skills

...means safely entering water over your head & resurfacing, controlling breathing while floating or treading water & swimming at least 25 yards, & exiting the water



### Helping Others

...means providing close supervision to anyone in your care, knowing the signs of drowning, knowing how to safely rescue others, and learning CPR

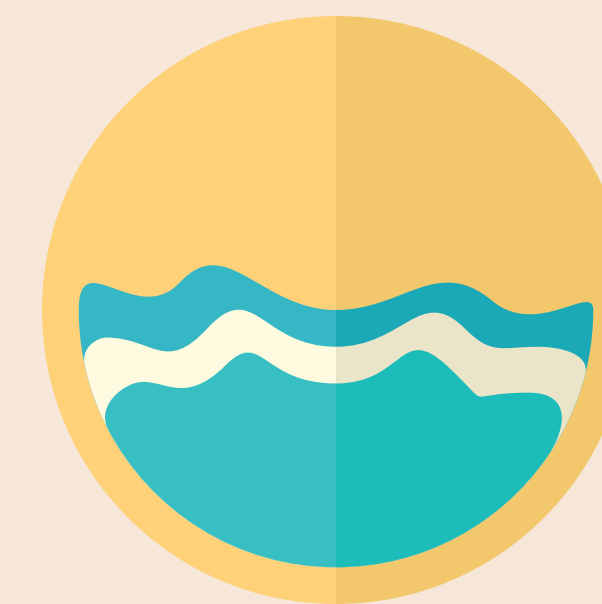
## Common Hazards



Swimming without supervision, such as lifeguards or water watchers



Unsafe activities, like diving in shallow water and horseplay



Rip currents at surf beaches



For More Details on Becoming Water Competent

Visit [watersafetyusa.org](http://watersafetyusa.org)

