

PRESS RELEASE

Water safety call as number of drowning deaths in young people in Wales rises

People of all ages in Wales are being encouraged to learn key safety tips to help young people stay safe around the sea, rivers and other open water.

The call from Water Safety Wales comes as statistics showed a rise in accidental drowning deaths involving people aged under 20 for a second year running.

Water Safety Wales – a collaboration of organisations striving to reduce drowning in Wales – is today issuing four simple lifesaving tips to help young people stay safe when visiting open water:

- Stop and think: Is it a safe place to swim? Are there hazards beneath the water? Are there hidden currents or fast-flowing water? How deep is it and can you get out easily?
- Stay together: Always go with someone else
- Float: If you get into trouble in the water, float to live until you feel calm
- Call 999 or 112: If you see someone else in trouble in the water

Seven people under 20 died in accidental water-related fatalities in Wales in 2023 – the highest number since comparable data became available from the National Water Safety Forum’s Water Incident Database (WAID) in 2015.

In total, there were 28 deaths in Wales from accidental water-related fatalities in 2023 across inland and coastal locations, compared with 22 the previous year.

The accidental deaths form part of the 55 total water-related fatalities in Wales for 2023, an increase of seven from the previous year and the first overall increase in Wales in five years.

Across the UK there were 236 accidental water-related fatalities last year – an increase of 10 from the previous year.

Chris Cousens, Water Safety Wales Chair, said:

“Everyone connected to Water Safety Wales was deeply saddened to hear of the tragic incidents involving young people losing their lives in open water in Wales last year.

“We believe that one drowning is one too many and the impact of losing a young person to drowning cannot be underestimated. People of all ages should learn and remember these four key safety tips for children and young people and adults should talk to their youngsters about them.

“More young people will be visiting the sea, rivers, reservoirs, lakes and other open water locations as weather improves and schools break for summer holidays. The water is still cold enough to trigger cold water shock, the body’s natural reaction to cold water which can cause panic and gasping.

“If you get into trouble in the water, resist the natural instinct to panic and Float to Live. Lean back and use your arms and legs to help you float on your back, then get control of your breathing before calling for help or swimming to safety. If you see someone else in trouble in the water, call 999 or 112. If you are at the coast, ask for the coastguard, if you are inland, ask for the fire service

‘Sea, rivers, lakes and other open water can look calm and inviting, but open water can be very different from a swimming pool. The water is usually moving and waves, currents and flow can make swimming difficult. It is important you know the depth of the water and what may be under the surface.’

The fresh data comes amid the news that, thanks to funding from the Welsh Government, The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents will be overseeing the secretariat of Water Safety Wales and the management of specific agreed projects such as in education, signage and local authority engagement.

Huw Irranca-Davies, Welsh Government Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs, said:

“Water is a fundamental part of our lives in Wales. However, with this beauty and bounty comes a firm responsibility: to do our utmost to ensure that our waters are safe for everyone.

“There are still too many water-related incidents and fatalities occurring. This is where our efforts toward water safety gain importance, and why the work being done by Water Safety Wales and, now with the support of the newfound partnership with RoSPA, is so crucial.

“Safety around water is paramount. The rise in drowning incidents among young people in Wales is a stark reminder that vigilance and education are crucial.

“Together, we can save lives and let's ensure that every child knows how to stay safe by open water this summer.”

Carlene McAvoy, Senior Policy Manager at RoSPA, said:

"We are saddened by the figures that show accidental water-related deaths in 2023 rose from 2022 in Wales. The data also shows that more than half of accidental fatalities involved everyday activities, which is also a cause for concern and action.

"To combat this, we look forward to working with Water Safety Wales members, to develop further initiatives and projects to help raise awareness of the dangers of water."

Key insights from the 2023 statistics include:

- **76 per cent of accidental fatalities were male**, with the highest risk age group being males aged 10-19.
- **59 per cent of accidental fatalities occurred inland**, underscoring the dangers present in rivers, lakes, and other inland water bodies.

- **Everyday activities accounted for 52 per cent** of these fatalities, emphasising the need for heightened awareness during routine activities near water.
- **Two accidental fatality reports noted the presence of alcohol**, highlighting the added risk factor of substance use around water.
- The rate of accidental water-related fatalities was **0.89 per 100,000 population**, an increase from the baseline average of 0.76 set by Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy 2024-2026 (WDPS).

Water Safety Wales supports the National Water Safety Forum's #RespectTheWater, a collective campaign aiming to provide simple life saving advice which can help members of the public take personal responsibility for their own and their family's safety by remembering two lifesaving tips. The Forum will also be promoting the campaign later in the summer for World Drowning Prevention Day on 25th July.

Chris Cousens added: "We will reduce drowning if everyone plays their part and Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy 2020-2026 aims to enable people living and visiting Wales to be safer in, on and around water by reducing water-related deaths and incidents."

To view and download the WAID 2023 report visit [here](#).

For more information about the #RespectTheWater campaign visit <https://respectthewater.com/>

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Footnotes:

(1) This year's WAID statistics includes a fatality figure from suspected or confirmed suicides. The figure for Wales was 11. Water Safety Wales is committed to better understand water-based suicide through the Wales drowning prevention strategy and is actively partnering with experts including public health teams and suicide prevention organisations. In accordance with Samaritans' [Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide](#) we do not highlight data concerning these kinds of incidents, nor do we identify or comment on specific locations or suicide methods. For further information contact mediaadvice@samaritans.org or call 07483 028725. Anyone can contact Samaritans free, at any time from any phone, on 116 123, email jo@samaritans.org or visit www.samaritans.org for more information.

Notes to editors

English language interviews with Chris Cousens are available. Please contact: Jessica Barker: jbarker@rospa.com , 07719 059 414, or Joe Tinkler: jtinkler@rospa.com , 07785 540 349. Welsh language interviews are also available on request.

Download Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy 2020-2026 and for more information about Water Safety Wales, visit: <http://nationalwatersafety.org.uk/wales/>

Water Safety Wales is a collaboration of individuals, communities, charities and public and private sector organisations with an interest in water safety and drowning prevention. It aims to reduce water related deaths and incidents in Wales by promoting the importance of a consistent and effective approach to water safety.

Water Safety Wales includes representatives from AdventureSmart UK, All Wales Beach Managers' Group, Atlantic Crest, Black Swimming Association, Canoe Wales, Canal & River Trust, Dwr Cymru Welsh Water, Dyfed Powys Police, Gwent Police, Keep Wales Tidy, Maritime and Coastguard Agency, Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service, Mineral Products Association,

National Advisory Group to Welsh Government on Suicide and Self-Harm Prevention, National Resources Wales, National Water Safety Forum, North Wales Fire and Rescue Service, North Wales Local Resilience Forum, Royal Life Saving Society UK, Royal National Lifeboat Institution, Royal Society for Prevention of Accidents, Samaritans, Severn Trent Water, South Wales Police, South Wales Fire and Rescue Service, Swansea Council, Swim Wales, Surf Lifesaving Association of Wales, The Bluetits Chill Swimmers, Water Safety Scotland.

A trend report on water-related fatalities in Wales is online here:

<https://www.nationalwatersafety.org.uk/waid/annual-reports-and-data>

The WAID water-related fatal accident report compiles data from a variety of sources including coroner's reports to determine the legal and medical 'outcome'. The 2022 report currently has a higher number of 'not recorded' reports than usual which may cause the 226 figure to be revised upwards when further information available.

See [this link](#) for further information about who to call in an emergency on or near water.

The 'Float to Live' advice is a key message in the national drowning prevention campaign, #RespectTheWater. It urges people to follow this lifesaving advice if they find themselves in trouble in cold water: Fight your instinct to swim hard or thrash about – this can lead to breathing in water and drowning. Instead, relax and FLOAT on your back, until you have regained control of your breathing.

The UN Resolution (April 2021) sets out urgent actions on drowning prevention for all countries and UN agencies. Creates a World Drowning Prevention day on 25th July. [A/75/L.76 - E - A/75/L.76 -Desktop \(undocs.org\)](#)