

Assateague Island

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Assateague Island National Seashore
Maryland and Virginia



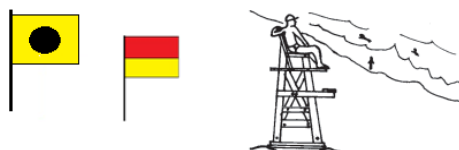
Beach and Surf Safety

You may forget your cares during a leisurely day at the beach but even a beautiful beach has dangers— especially for the unaware. Whether “catching some rays” or plunging in the surf, the information in this brochure is designed to help you enjoy the fun and avoid the dangers.



NPS Lifeguard Protected Beach Area

NPS Lifeguards supervise designated beach areas in Maryland and Virginia sections of Assateague. For a safe recreational experience, locate near an on duty lifeguard within the boundaries of the red over yellow flag. Hours of operation are from 10 am – 5pm. Take extra precaution when swimming outside the lifeguard area or during off duty hours; wear a life jacket.



Lifeguard Beach Flag Safety System



Yellow with black circle flags are permanently placed 50 yards beyond the lifeguard area and represent a safety zone. No fishing, no rigid craft, no open beach fires and no dogs permitted between these flags.



Red over yellow flags represents the area supervised by lifeguards. For safety, recreate within the boundaries of these flags.



Yellow flag indicates a moderate warning for surf conditions. Caution should be exercised



Red flag indicates a high hazard exists such as strong surf and seaward currents.



Double red flags indicate a severe hazard and a closure is in effect. Visitors will be kept out of the water until the hazard subsides.



Purple flag indicates potentially dangerous marine organisms such as stinging jellyfish are present.

When you hear the whistle: Lifeguards will not signal swimmers simply because they are in deep water. The lifeguards will signal swimmers toward shore because they are approaching a hazardous area or they are moving too far out for adequate supervision.

First Aid and Rescue: The Lifeguard operation is equipped with rescue equipment and first aid supplies. The lifeguards are trained in ocean rescue and are certified Emergency Medical Responders. If you need assistance, contact a lifeguard or call 911.

Visitors with physical disabilities: Physically challenged individuals who require special consideration in aquatic recreation may want to use the protected beach. Beach wheelchairs are available in both Maryland and Virginia district beaches. Contact a Lifeguard or Ranger for direction and assistance.

Surf Rescue Demonstrations: If you want to learn more about our lifeguard operation and more about beach and surf safety, attend one of our Lifeguard Surf Rescue Demonstrations.
Virginia District – Monday, Wednesday and Friday 10:00 am
Maryland District – Saturday, Sunday and Tuesday 10:30am

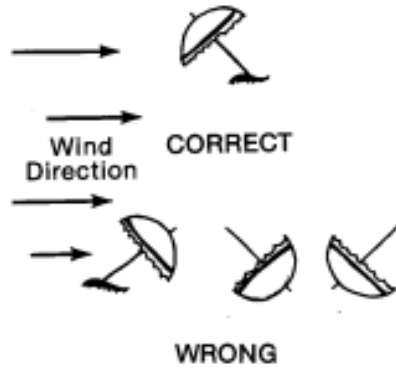
Hazards

Lightning: In 1986, four people were killed by a lightning strike as they huddled under a beach umbrella on a nearby beach. If you see lightning or hear thunder, seek immediate shelter inside your vehicle or an enclosed building. **Do not** huddle under an umbrella or underneath a lifeguard tower. During a storm, the entire protected beach will be closed to the public.

Shark: During the rare occasion of a **shark** sighting, the beach may be closed to entry. A closure may also occur if a school of **bluefish** are in a “feeding frenzy”. The risk of a shark attack is low however; there are ways to lower the risk even further. For instance, don’t swim at dawn, dusk and night, swim with a buddy, don’t go in the water if you are bleeding and stay clear of schooling bluefish and other schooling fish.

Hazards

Unsecure umbrella: An umbrella blown across the beach by the wind has caused many injuries. When strong gusty winds blow, umbrella tops should be set facing into the wind. Make sure a good size hole is dug and pack in sand firmly around it.



Sun: Each year a number of visitors get sun burn from over exposure to UV radiation. Watch your children, use clothing, umbrellas and sunscreens. Lifeguards may have extra sunscreen if you need it. Umbrellas may be purchased at the snack shack in the MD district and in the town of Chincoteague in the VA District.

Jellyfish: Most jellyfish you encounter at Assateague will not sting but some do, particularly those with color. Be safe - do not touch any jellyfish. If you get stung, see a lifeguard. You can rinse the area with sea water or vinegar. A badly stung person should receive medical treatment. Check to see if lifeguards are flying a purple flag.

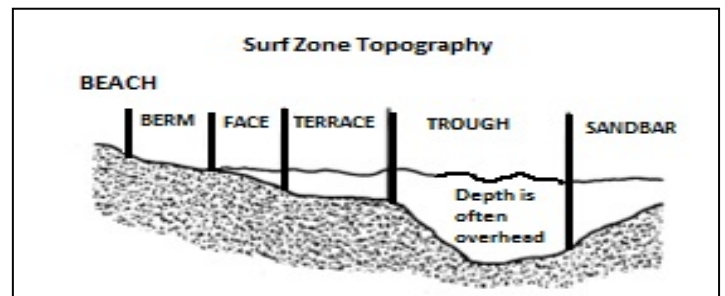
Flotation Devices: Body Boards, Noodles, and other Flotation Aids can be considered a hazard in the ocean. Many drownings and rescue incidents are associated with the use of inappropriate flotation devices. Many people associate "safety" with flotation aids and feel safe going out much further than they should. Currents or wind can move an unsuspecting person into deep water or far off shore. This is an invitation to disaster; people may be separated from the device by waves, slipping off or choose to prematurely let go of the device to try and make better progress to shore.

Remember, flotation aids that move with waves travel with considerable speeds with the compound force of the wave behind you. The weight of a person on a speeding object may cause an injury if there is a collision with another person or the hard packed beach surface. Hard objects, such as surfboards, kayaks and skim boards can be especially hazardous. For these reasons, Coast Guard approved lifejackets are the only devices allowed on the lifeguard protected beach

Strong Surf Onshore winds cause waves. Because ocean winds vary, waves change from day to day. All waves deserve respect. Body surfing and swim fins are allowed in the lifeguard area – be careful! Do not try to ride waves that are too forceful for your level of skill. Sand abrasions, broken limbs, dislocated shoulders and spinal injuries are not uncommon as a result of being thrown to the hard packed beach bottom.

To escape a waves great force, you can duck under or retreat from breaking waves. If you are riding a wave in some fashion, and are thrown off, try and prevent direct head and neck contact with the ocean floor. Do not run and dive into the surf if you do not know the depth and topography.

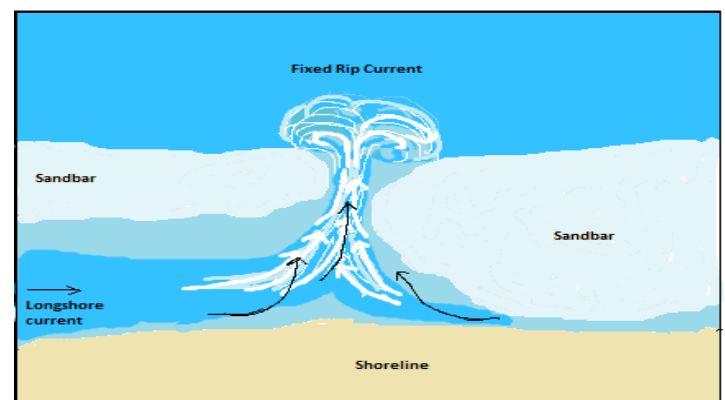
Shore Topography Be aware that the surf zone topography can be variable. A beach face may be narrow or steep. The trough and terrace may contain ridges, holes and drop offs. Often, when the depth is only waist deep on the sandbar, the water will be over your head on the way out. In other areas, it may be shallow the whole way out to the sandbar. For your protection, people will be kept off the sandbar until it is reasonably safe for young people and poor swimmers alike, to access the sandbar.



Surf Zone Currents There are two types of surf zone currents to be aware of; one that moves along the shore line called a longshore current and ones that move in a seaward direction called a seaward current.

Longshore Currents will form when waves approach the shoreline at an angle. This current is present on most days and may be strong. When lifeguards are on duty, they will post the speed and direction on beach information signs.

Seaward Currents will form as a result of wave action and wave energy. Seaward currents include back rush, fixed rip currents, permanent rip currents, traveling rip currents and flash rip currents. Do not panic if you get in one and do not wear yourself out trying to swim against it. Normally they are not wide. Swim parallel with the shore a short distance and then swim to shore out of the current. Save your strength for your own rescue. If you cannot get to shore, float on your back and control your breathing. Call for help and raise one arm up for attention.



Safety Advice

- Swim near an on duty lifeguard
- Learn to swim
- Swim with a buddy
- Wear a coastguard approved lifejacket
- Check the depth before you dive

Interested in becoming an NPS Surf Lifeguard?

You will receive 100 hours of paid training including surf rescue, ATV training, EMR and CPR training. Candidates must pass a timed swim and run test. For more information, contact Jeff Clark: 410-629-6094 jeff_clark@nps.gov