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Cold waters and warm weather make for increased drowning risk

Sixteen adult drowning deaths in 2009; no child deaths in two years

KING COUNTY, WA – The risk of drowning is a concern this weekend and into early summer as weather warms and the local swim season begins. Local lakes are cold and dangerously deep, and rivers are running swift and cold.

"Our local lakes and rivers may look inviting in the warming weather, but this is also the riskiest time to swim, tube, or raft in local lakes and rivers because of the cold and rapid waters," said Dr. David Fleming, Director and Health Officer for Public Health - Seattle & King County.

Preventable and tragic deaths happen every year in local waterways. In 2009, King County lost 16 adults over 18 years of age to unintentional drowning, 10 of which took place in open water, such as rivers, lakes, ponds or Puget Sound. Most drowning deaths occurred in the earlier part of swim season. In 2008, there were 100 drowning deaths statewide.

A positive development is that no children have drowned in two years by unintentional or non-traffic related causes. Drowning prevention activities and policies have contributed to this success, and local and state officials are building on these efforts to help communities and families prevent future tragedies.

Keys to drowning prevention

- Know the water – Washington waters are cold enough to cause hypothermia even on the hottest summer day; hypothermia may weaken even the strongest swimmer.
- Know your limits – drowning often happens when a person tires while swimming or a novice swimmer tries to keep up with friends who are stronger swimmers.
- Learn to swim, and choose lifeguarded areas. Wear a life jacket while swimming anywhere without lifeguards. Avoid swimming at local beaches until lifeguards go on duty, usually in mid-June. Until lifeguards go on duty, use indoor pools.
- Avoid drinking alcohol or using other drugs while swimming, boating, tubing, or rafting.
- Watch children closely when they are in or near any type of water; stay close enough to reach them immediately.

Drowning prevention activities and policies make a difference

- In recent years, members of the Statewide Drowning Prevention Network, co-chaired by Seattle Children's Hospital and Public Health - Seattle & King County, have stepped up education, enforcement and safety efforts in swimming environments.
- Similarly, the King County Child Death Review (CDR) Committee has continued to examine child deaths locally and look at factors that led to the deaths and how to prevent future incidents.
- It has been two years since anyone has drowned in a Public Health - Seattle & King County inspected facility, including pools, spas, wading pools and water parks. The last drowning death of a child in a Public Health regulated facility was June of 2006.
- Children and adults used to regularly drown in the Lake Washington Ship Canal. In 1999, a City of Seattle ordinance banned swimming in the ship canal. There have been no child drowning deaths in the ship canal for 11 years.
- Children used to regularly drown while falling from or capsizing in small boats. In 1999, then-Governor Gary Locke signed a state law requiring child lifejacket use while boating, which has contributed to reduced drownings.
- State and local health codes require drowning prevention provisions for regulated pools, spas and water parks. These include requirements for barriers or fencing, lifeguards, CPR and First Aid, and operation manuals. Drowning deaths involving children have declined significantly in these venues, especially since the late 1980s.

For more information on water safety and drowning prevention, visit www.kingcounty.gov/health/injury.

Providing effective and innovative health and disease prevention services for over 1.9 million residents and visitors of King County, Public Health – Seattle & King County works for safer and healthier communities for everyone, every day. More at www.kingcounty.gov/health