

COVER STORY

Tips on how you can escape a rip current in Lake Michigan

Tresa Baldas
Detroit Free Press
USA TODAY NETWORK

Lake Michigan is especially prone to rip currents, which are powerful currents of water moving away from the shore, and they can sweep even the strongest swimmer away from shore. According to the United States Life-saving Association, rip currents account for more than 100 fatal drownings every year in the United States, and hundreds more rescues. If heading to Lake Michigan for a day of swimming, the USLA offers the following tips to stay safe.

What are clues that rip currents may be present?

- A narrow gap of darker, seemingly calmer water between areas of breaking waves and whitewater.
- A channel of churning, choppy water.
- A difference in water color.
- A line of foam, seaweed or debris moving seaward.
- Look for signs or red flags alerting for dangerous water conditions.

What if I’m caught in a rip current?

- Try to relax, rip currents don’t pull you under the water.
- Don’t swim against the current.
- Swim out of the current in a direction following the shoreline, or toward breaking waves, then at an angle toward the beach.
- You may be able to escape by floating or treading water if the current circulates back toward shore.

- If you feel you will be unable to reach shore, draw attention to yourself: yell and wave for assistance.
- Remember the “3 F’s Rule” – Flip. Float. Follow the safest path back to shore. Don’t fight the current, but swim to the side.

How do I help someone else caught in a current?

- Don’t become a victim while trying to help someone else. Many people have died trying to rescue rip current victims.
- Get help from a lifeguard. If one is not present, call 911, then try to direct the victim to swim following the shoreline to escape.
- If possible, throw the rip current victim something that floats.
- Never enter the water without a flotation device.

How can I protect myself and my family from rip currents?

- Never swim alone, or near piers or break walls.
 - If possible, always swim in an area protected by lifeguards and consult lifeguards before entering the water.
 - Assume that rip currents are always present.
 - Learn to swim in the surf and make sure your children can swim in the surf. Pool swimming is not the same as swimming at a surf beach.
 - Learn to identify rip currents and take the time to evaluate the water before you enter it.
- For more information on rip currents, the National Weather Service offers additional help at www.weather.gov/safety/ripcurrent.

Why Lake Michigan ranks as deadliest lake in United States

Tresa Baldas
Detroit Free Press
USA TODAY NETWORK

According to the Great Lakes Surf Rescue Project, more than 1,350 people have drowned in the Great Lakes over the last 15 years, nearly half in Lake Michigan. The tragedies involved circumstances of all sorts: Swimmers being pulled out into open water by rip currents. People being overcome by waves or currents while trying to rescue others. People being washed off piers. Boaters and kayakers falling overboard without life jackets.

Are the Great Lakes safe to swim?

Dave Benjamin, founder and executive director of the Great Lakes Surf Rescue Project (GLSRP), a nonprofit that tracks drownings in all five Great Lakes, says that about a third of all Great Lakes drownings are related to dangerous currents, while the other two-thirds involve people getting into water over their head and not knowing how to survive. According to the Great Lakes Water Safety Consortium, dangerous currents and breaking waves are common in the Great Lakes, though rip currents and others found near piers are especially dangerous for swimmers and can lead to drownings. Rip currents will not pull a swimmer under the water, instead it will carry them out to the open water, away from shore.

How to escape a rip current

To escape this rip, experts offer what’s known as the “3 F’s Rule” – Flip. Float. Follow the safest path back to

shore. They warn not to fight the current, but swim to the side. Many Michigan beaches also have signs on the dangers of rip currents, and illustrate the hourglass shape of a rip current as it extends from a beach.

Lake Michigan’s danger

According to the National Weather Service, the west Michigan coastline along Lake Michigan has the most current related incidents of all of the Great Lakes, including rescues and fatalities. In 2020, Michigan saw more than 30 current-related incidents, while Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana saw fewer than five. There are multiple reasons: the eastern shore of Lake Michigan is favorably aligned for the weather – which typically moves from west to east – and has wave conditions conducive to current formation; many of our beaches along the Lake Michigan shoreline have sandbars, break walls and piers, which make them especially prone to structural, longshore, and rip currents. The National Weather Service notes that the number of current incidents and drownings in Lake Michigan must be kept relative to how many visit its beaches. For example, Holland sees more drownings than any other beach town in Michigan – 15 over the last 15 years – but Holland State Park sees around 2 million visitors every year. “These beaches are all safe and fun to swim at,” the National Weather Service states on its website. “But beachgoers must remain alert to the changing weather and wave conditions, and heed the advice of park patrol and lifeguards.” And there’s the rub. Michigan’s life-guard chairs are empty.



Lisa MacDonald, 57, of Chesterfield Township, photographed at her home with an undated photo of her late daughter, Emily, getting a piggyback ride from her boyfriend, Kory Ernster, on a beach in Florida. MacDonald is part of a campaign to bring lifeguards back to Michigan beaches after Emily MacDonald, 19, and her boyfriend, Ernster, 22, drowned in August 2022 in Lake Michigan 15 minutes after taking a selfie from the beach at South Haven. MacDonald has a wrongful death lawsuit against South Haven and is able to press forward after the city’s claims of governmental immunity were rejected by a judge. MANDI WRIGHT/DETROIT FREE PRESS

Lifeguards

Continued from Page 1A

It’s a harsh reality in the Great Lakes State since the state parks got rid of lifeguards in 1993, and most municipal beaches eventually followed suit, all citing money, liability and staffing shortage concerns. In a state of more than 1,000 beaches, and where tourism is big business – drawing in 128 million visi-

tors who spent \$29.3 billion in 2023 alone – there currently are only two public Lake Michigan beaches with lifeguards: one in St. Joseph, the other in New Buffalo. “This is less than third-world,” said Illinois lifeguard advocate Dave Benjamin, founder and executive director of the Great Lakes Surf Rescue Project (GLSRP), a nonprofit that tracks drownings in all five Great Lakes, and has been pushing for years to bring lifeguards back to Michigan.

The city of Chicago has them. So do the states of Wisconsin and Indiana. All three border Lake Michigan, which accounts for nearly half of the 1,362 fatal drownings that have occurred in all of the Great Lakes since 2015, according to the GLSRP. State and local officials, meanwhile, maintain the vast majority of Lake Michigan visitors are swimming safely, and that lifeguards have grown obsolete here for a number of reasons: They’re too hard to find, cost too much and can

create liabilities, they say. The state and beach towns also put emphasis on personal responsibility: If swimmers want to stay safe, they say, they should follow the posted signs and flags, and avoid the water on high-risk days. For drowning prevention advocates, this approach to beach safety isn’t just failing, it’s putting more people in danger. Innocent bystanders and vacationers have become fill-ins for lifeguards,

See LIFEGUARDS, Page 17A