



Drowning and other injury related to aquatic activities at ages 55 years and older in Australia

FACT SHEET

This fact sheet contains preliminary information from a Briefing being prepared by the National Injury Surveillance Unit to be released later this year.

Drowning and Near-Drowning

“Drowning” is used to refer to “the process of experiencing respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in liquid” (van Beeck et al 2005). Outcomes from drowning can include death, survival with lasting consequences, or survival with no detectable consequences. “Near drowning” is less well defined. It can refer to survived episodes of respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in liquid. It can also refer to episodes in which a person nearly, but not quite, experiences respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in liquid (e.g. a person who becomes exhausted while swimming, but manages to reach a shore, perhaps with assistance).

Drowning deaths

- About 100 people aged 55 years or older died annually by drowning each year in Australia over the period 1997 to 2005, equating to 28% of all drowning deaths at all ages.
- Males are more likely to die by drowning than females in all age categories over 55 years.
- Of the drowning deaths, an annual average of 62 were unintentional (excluding those associated with water transport). On average, 24 deaths per year were suicides. Smaller numbers each year are of undetermined intent and homicides.
- The annual average of 75 accidental drowning deaths (which includes those associated with water transport and other unintentional deaths) in this age group per annum comprises deaths in natural bodies of water (n=26), swimming pools (n=6), bath-tubs (n=5), events related to water transport (n=11), storms and floods (n=1) and miscellaneous and unspecified cases (n= 26).

Drowning hospitalisations

- Over the period 1999-00 to 2003-04 there was an annual average of 75 hospitalisations in Australia due to non-fatal drowning among people aged 55 years and over. This equated to 12% of all non-fatal drowning hospitalisations at all ages.
- About one-third of these cases have characteristics that suggest that they had severe and often long-lasting outcomes.
- Falls were a common mechanism of injury for people aged 55 years and older hospitalised due to events at aquatic places. Falls accounted for 40% of all cases occurring at places identifiable as aquatic, 67% of those at swimming centres and 57% at beaches.
- Hence, while prevention of drowning remains the primary issue for aquatic safety, attention to the prevention of other types of injuries that occur in aquatic settings is also warranted.