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Use caution, knowledge to avoid risks, stay safe during summertime water activities

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HEIDELBERG, Germany -- When I was four years old, I almost drowned.

I don't remember all the details clearly because I was so young, but I remember it involved running around a large outdoor pool at a hotel, slipping on the wet tile, and falling in.



PHOTO COURTESY U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

I remember not being able to breathe and sinking like a rock despite my desperate flailing about. I heard my mom yelling faintly in the distance. The light of the sun got darker the farther to the bottom I fell, and just when things started to get really dark I saw a splash above me and moments later my mom had pulled me out, holding me as I gasped for breath.

My mom saved my life that day.

Apparently that experience links me to lot of Americans. In a

March 2009 survey conducted by the American Red Cross, about half of the adults interviewed claimed to have almost drowned in their lifetime. One in four said they knew someone who drowned.

Drowning is one of the leading causes of accidental death among Americans today. But there are things that can be done to make sure activities in and around pools, lakes, rivers, oceans and beaches stay safe. It's important to have fun in the sun, but it's important to be safe, too, and safety experts say that may take nothing more than a bit of knowledge and caution.

Because most installations in USAREUR do not have on-post swimming pools, most Soldiers head off post with their families to swim. U.S. Army Europe safety officials said one of the most

important things for Americans in Germany to remember is that there are differences between swimming areas in the States and “schwimmbad” and other host-nation swimming areas.

The most important thing to remember is that the role of “lifeguards” at German swimming facilities is different than in the U.S.

“When you go to a schwimmbad (or other authorized swimming area), there’s someone there who tests the water, they’re there to give CPR if someone needs it, but it’s not like in the States where they sit in a chair and watch the pool,” said Maureen Pikal, USAREUR deputy safety officer.

Pikal said all authorized host-nation sponsored swimming areas are approved for Americans to use as well, but lakeside or oceanfront beaches with no lifeguards on duty are not. And she stressed that even in areas where there is a lifeguard on duty it is still up to each individual to know how to stay safe.

Three USAREUR Soldiers have drowned in Germany since 2005, added Dave Scott, USAREUR Safety chief. One was a non-swimmer using a pool with a lifeguard on duty, one was boating on a lake, one was swimming in the Rhine, and all three were with other Soldiers at the time, he said. This year a Fort Lewis, Wash., Soldier was found drowned in an Italian river.

To help, the USAREUR Safety Office offers the following tips:

- Learn to swim. The best thing anyone can do to stay safe in and around the water is to learn to swim.
- Never swim alone. Always swim with a buddy and watch out for each other. Have a rescue plan that doesn’t require you to swim for a person in trouble.
- Know your swimming limitations and stay within them. Don't try to keep up with a stronger, more skilled swimmer or encourage others to keep up with you.
- Swim in supervised areas only. Obey “no diving” signs that indicate an area is unsafe for head-first entry. Enter feet-first into water if you don’t know how deep it is. Learn the correct way to dive from a qualified instructor.
- Watch out for the “dangerous too’s” -- too tired, too cold, too far from safety, too much sun, and too much strenuous activity.
- Do not chew gum or eat while you swim; you could easily choke.
- Use common sense about swimming after eating. In general, you do not have to wait an hour after eating before you may safely swim. However, if you have had a large meal, it is wise to let digestion get started before doing strenuous activity such as swimming.
- Alcohol and swimming don’t mix. Alcohol impairs judgment, balance, and coordination, especially in the water. It affects swimming and diving skills and reduces the body’s ability to stay warm.
- Always wear an approved life jacket when boating and fishing.

-- Be aware of local weather conditions and prepare for electrical storms. Because water conducts electricity, it is wise to stop swimming or boating as soon as you see or hear a storm.

The Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center Web site has a variety of additional resources on water and other summer safety topics, including videos and interactive training games. To check out those resources, go to <https://safety.army.mil> and click on the “Safe Summer” graphic at the bottom of the page.



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