Look before you leap

The ocean floor is shrouded by the swirling water and crashing waves. Visibility is limited, even close to shore. If you are unfamiliar with the beach you are visiting, wade through the water before diving in. Make a point of feeling around with your feet and peering into the water when the waves recede. Never dive head-first into unfamiliar waters. Awareness of your surroundings and the conditions of the surf are fundamental to your ocean safety.

Swim parallel to the shore and signal for help when caught in a rip

If you are swimming in the ocean and find yourself caught in a strong current or rip tide, it is important to remain calm and to try to stay close to and parallel with the shore. If you are a strong swimmer, swim parallel to the shore until you are out of the pull of the rip, then head in toward the shore. If you tire, if you feel you cannot make it, or the rip is just too strong, raise your arm and wave to the lifeguard and/or others on the beach for help.

Know if you are caught in a rip

You will be able to tell that you are caught in a rip if you suddenly find yourself further from shore than you expected to or should be. You will find that you will struggle to swim but appear to be getting nowhere. Struggling in a rip can quickly tire even the strongest swimmer, so do not hesitate to signal a lifeguard should you become tired or frightened.

Use an inflatable pool as a play spot for babies at the beach.

If you are really concerned about the safety of babies or small toddlers at the beach, or if your children are too young for ocean swimming, take along a small inflatable pool. It won't take up much room, and you can easily inflate it on the beach. Set it up under the shade of a beach umbrella or inside a cabana to protect your baby from sunburn, since tender skin will burn faster when sunlight reflects off water. You can fill the pool with buckets of sea water to a safe level - you might want to enlist older children to help. Remember to NEVER leave your child unattended –even in a small amount of water.

Look for colored flags that indicate safe swimming areas and dangerous conditions

Patrolled beaches will display two colored flags indicating the safest area for ocean swimming; the colors of these flags may vary depending on where you are. Also, flags in particular colors can be used to indicate certain conditions. High risk and dangerous condition flags should be clearly displayed as a warning to swimmers. If you are unsure what each flag represents at the beach where you are, be sure to ask the lifeguard on duty for a clear explanation. This is especially important if you are visiting a beach in another country, so that you are clear on the local indicators of ocean safety.

Signal a lifeguard

Knowing the appropriate way to call for help while ocean swimming is part of ensuring your own safety. Lifeguards are on constant lookout for people having trouble in the water, so if you are struggling - for any reason at all - signal for help. Simply raise your arm as far out of the water as possible and wave it around. The lifeguards will be with you as soon as they can. Stay calm and concentrate on treading water (dog paddling) until they reach you.

Keep baby cool while having fun

The best way to ensure a great day at the beach is to plan for your family's fun and safety. Babies are particularly sensitive and need to be protected from the heat and the sun. Make sure that you apply sunblock liberally and regularly, bring an umbrella, and keep a hat and t-shirt on children when they are not under the umbrella. To help them keep cool and enjoy the fun the beach has to offer, try digging a shallow hole in the sand close to smaller shore waves. Water will trickle in as the waves roll up the shore, filling the make-shift pool with fresh water every few minutes. Do not leave a baby or young child unattended, especially by or in the water: sit baby between your legs, facing the water, so that she can see the water entering the safe area you've made. Supply waterproof, age-appropriate toys to keep baby entertained.

Learn to swim

Ocean swimming will be more enjoyable and safer if your swimming skills are solid. Learn to swim or improve your swimming skills so that you have the strength and confidence to react to different situations quickly and correctly. Good swimmers rarely have difficulty swimming back to shore if they end up drifting away from safer areas, and can be of help to less strong swimmers in difficult conditions.

If you have an emergency, do not panic

Should it happen that you do become in need of rescue while swimming in the ocean, remember not to panic. When the lifeguard reaches you, refrain from clutching and grabbing at him or his rescue craft. This will only interfere with the lifeguard's efforts and may put both your lives at risk. Lifeguards are trained in sea rescue, so relax and follow the lifeguard's expert instructions.

Watch your children closely

Family fun and ocean safety should be your first priority during a day at the beach. While beachgoers are enjoying the water, lifeguards are constantly on the look-out for swimmers in distress. Nevertheless, you are responsible for your own well-being and that of the small children who are with you. Be prepared to watch small children closely while they are ocean swimming, or even just near the water. Lifeguards may be on the lookout, but accidents can happen quickly, and it's best that you know what is going on so that you can get help if necessary. You'll also want to keep an eye on children playing away from the water so that they do not get lost in the crowds.

Do not drink and swim

Many resort-style beaches may allow you to consume alcoholic beverages while enjoying the sun. If working on your suntan is all you intend to do during your day at the beach, go ahead - relax and sip away (though you should still be careful to not become dehydrated, and you should not drive after drinking on the beach all day!) But if you're thinking of cooling off in the water, you should definitely wait until after your swim to indulge. Alcohol is potent by itself, and sitting in the sun - especially if you aren't used to it - tends to dehydrate you further and heighten the effects of alcohol. Inebriation will change your perspective on your environment, and will slow your reaction time. Much as you would not drive or even run a race while intoxicated, you should swim only when sober to help ensure your safety while ocean swimming.

Choose beaches that have a shoreline and waves that appropriate for children

Big waves are fine for experienced ocean swimmers and surfers. For younger children, a suitable place to swim is in the smaller shore waves, especially if this is their first beach outing. Little ones will be happy to splash and play in the water running up the shore.

Dangerous conditions: a rip

A rip or tip-tide is a current of water moving in a seaward direction. It is formed by the movement of the waves as they pound onto the beach in a sideways motion. This displaces and pushes other parts of the water back out to sea. A rip is a dangerous condition because it can swiftly carry objects - including swimmers - out to the deeper part of the ocean. If you are not a strong swimmer, avoid entering the water during rip conditions. If you do get caught in a rip and are unable to free yourself from its grasp, lifeguards will be able to rescue if you signal to them - or to others nearby - that you need help.

Be prepared to be strongly dealt with should you panic while being rescued

Part of a lifeguard's expert training is to know when a victim is endangering his own life and the lifeguard's. If you do panic during a rescue, the lifeguard may have to resort to knocking you unconscious. Don't be offended. Controlling an unconscious person in the water is far easier than dealing with a panicky and unpredictable one. Remember - you should try as hard as you can to not panic. But if you do, a sore head and bruised ego will be a better outcome than both you and the lifeguard drowning. Keep a level head and follow safety guidelines to ensure the safest ocean swimming.

Identify lifeguard stations and locate yourself near them for peace of mind

If you are concerned about taking your children to the beach because you fear for their safety at the beach or while ocean swimming, go to a beach that is fully patrolled by lifeguards, since they have extensive emergency training. Consider choosing a spot on the beach that has easy access to the lifeguards and/or a telephone. That way, you will not have far to take your child for the necessary help in case of an emergency. Even if you are nervous, however, remember that lifeguards are there to monitor and protect everyone on the beach, so refrain from distracting them with minor complaints. That way you - and everyone else - will be assured of a quick response in the case of a real problem on the beach.

Personalize your beach gear to mark your spot

Popular beaches often become crowded with many other families trying to cool off and enjoy the sun. There are usually lots of kids and lots of mothers and fathers - and lots of beach chairs, umbrellas and other paraphernalia in bright (but similar) colors. Pretty soon, everyone starts looking the same - especially to a child. Mark your spot in an unusual and creative way. Post your family name to your beach umbrella or cabana, or make streamers in favorite colors and attach to them back of your beach chair. Perhaps you would like to make a family flag from an old pillowcase that will act as a beacon specific to your family. Use fabric paints in bright colors so your kids can easily locate you among the families enjoying a day at the beach. Having an easily-identifiable meeting spot or 'home base' is an important part of a day at the beach and ocean safety.

Look for patrolled areas; these are often the safest places to swim

The best places for ocean swimming are those areas patrolled by lifeguards. Lifeguards are trained to select the safest swimming spot for each day according to the conditions. Colored flags mark the patrolled area. Swim between these flags for ocean safety.

Notify trained ocean safety professionals and keep a level head to help someone who is struggling or drowning

The sight of a fellow beach-goer hauled from the water by a lifeguard is enough to make anyone stop and think about his or her personal safety and how to help others while ocean swimming. If you see someone struggling in the water or even drowning, notify a lifeguard - even if you have training. If this is impossible, toss the struggling swimmer a floating object, such as a kick board, a life jacket or even an empty drinking container. Send someone else to find a lifeguard, while you stay with or near the struggling person to keep him calm until help arrives. If you must enter the water, be aware that the person is likely to panic, so you should take along an object suitable for supporting at least two people. Do not allow the victim to cling to you, or you will both be at risk of drowning. Continue to speak to the victim in a reasonable and clear voice until you reach them. Talk the victim toward the beach or keep them company until help arrives.