

9 Tips to Keep You Safe at the Swimming Hole this Summer

Summer is here, and with temperatures rising, many Vermonters will be seeking out the sweet relief of a cooling dip at their local swimming hole. While there are many managed beaches and swimming areas throughout Vermont (including at many of Vermont's state parks), others will invariably look to the respite of hidden falls, quiet ponds, river shallows and potholes.

While swimming holes offer wonderful recreational opportunities, swimming at an unmanaged location comes with risks. Good decision-making, and a little bit of planning, can often avert a tragedy. Here are nine tips for everyone swimming in natural bodies of water this summer:



- 1. Remember that water is wild:** Complacency is the enemy of preparedness, and it is easy to be lulled into a sense of safety by all the good times had, and happy memories made, at your local swimming hole. Remember that water is wild, and always changing. Heavy rains, floating or lodged debris, or even extended periods of heat and drought can change currents, affect depths and alter the underwater structure of a wild body of water. ALWAYS exercise caution when swimming in natural water bodies.
- 2. Don't swim alone:** One of the most basic safety tips is to bring someone with you. If one of you gets into trouble, there will be someone there to assist. Drowning only takes a few minutes, and emergency responders may be 15-20 minutes away. Swimming alone is never a good idea, but especially not in natural water bodies.
- 3. Know the conditions:** Has it rained heavily in the last several days? Swollen rivers and fast-moving currents can create dangerous conditions for days after a heavy rain event. Make a habit of checking the weather. If there have been recent heavy rains, conditions may be dangerous, even if it is a clear, sunny, calm day. Be smart, and make alternate plans if there have been heavy rains or recent flooding.
- 4. Observe your surroundings:** When you arrive at the swimming hole, take a look at the currents. Listen for the sound of unusually loud rushing water. Observe the path that debris takes as it floats downstream. Swimming in natural water bodies means that you must use good judgment. Observe conditions and don't take unnecessary chances.
- 5. Swim sober:** Drugs and alcohol can dull your senses, impair your judgment and slow response time. Safe swimming is sober swimming.
- 6. Bring a rope:** Most natural swimming holes are not equipped with safety or rescue equipment. Saving a life could be as simple as adding a long, sturdy rope to your beach bag for the day. If conditions are bad and someone is struggling, don't get into the water with them. Instead, throw them a rope and pull them in from shore.
- 7. Beware of slippery rocks:** Many deaths at swimming holes in Vermont are caused by falls from wet, slippery rocks. Exercise extreme caution when climbing or maneuvering on wet rocks.
- 8. Don't swim above, or under, waterfalls:** Heavy currents can wash people over falls, and undertows can trap swimmers underwater. Avoid swimming above, or directly beneath waterfalls.
- 9. Be realistic about your own abilities:** A part of responsible outdoor recreation is understanding your own limits, and not putting yourself or others in danger by taking reckless risks. Be honest with yourself about your own strength, abilities and shortcomings. Don't over-extend yourself, and don't assume that rescue is always an option.

Outdoor recreation may well be the sweetest fruit of summer, but it always comes with inherent risks. Get outside, but be responsible, be safe, and take care of yourself and your friends and neighbors. Respect nature, use good judgment, and understand that water is wild and ever-changing. If you follow the guidelines above, you will have a better chance of avoiding tragedy and enjoying an uneventful summer of fun and great memories at your favorite swimming hole.