# Water Safety Lesson Plan for Grades 9-12

A free 50-minute high school lesson: why teens who can swim still drown, alcohol, life jackets and cold water, real data, and a peer safety message.

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**Grades 9-12 · 50 minutes · For teachers**

This lesson shows high school students that **knowing how to swim is not the same as being safe in open water**, and gives them the facts and words to look out for each other. In 50 minutes, students analyze real data from CDC and the U.S. Coast Guard, name the influences that drive risk, review how to respond in an emergency, and create a short, sourced safety message for their peers.

## Almost half

of 10- to 17-year-olds who drowned could swim, according to U.S. child death review data for 2005-2014 (Water Safety USA).

Source: watersafetyusa.org https://www.watersafetyusa.org/life-jackets-save-lives.html

### Learning objectives

- Explain why being able to swim does not make a teen safe in open water, using CDC, Coast Guard and Water Safety USA data.
- Analyze how peers, alcohol and overconfidence influence risk around water.
- Judge whether a water safety source is valid and reliable.
- Describe what to do in a water emergency, and where to get CPR training that includes rescue breaths.
- Create a short, accurate safety message that cites its source.

### Materials

- ☐ Five data cards (text in Activity 1), printed and placed at stations
- ☐ Chart paper and markers, or a shared slide for each team
- ☐ The PSA rubric in the Assessment step
- ☐ Optional: the Recognize Drowning and Reach or Throw, Don't Go posters

## Lesson steps

### 1 Warm-up: Myth or fact? 5 minutes

Students vote with a show of fingers (1 = myth, 2 = fact). Reveal answers after the data stations, not now.

- Teens who know how to swim aren't really at risk of drowning.
- A couple of drinks at the lake is harmless if you're a strong swimmer.
- Good swimmers don't need life jackets in a kayak.
- You'd hear it if someone near you was drowning.

### 2 Activity 1: Data stations 15 minutes

Teams of 4 rotate through the five cards (3 minutes each), or each team takes one card and reports back. For each card they answer: *What's the pattern? Who is most affected? Who published this, and how do you know it's reliable? What's one action that would help?*

- **Card 1, Swimmers drown too:** almost half of 10- to 17-year-olds who drowned could swim (U.S. child death review data, 2005-2014, via Water Safety USA). Almost half of drowning deaths among people 15 and older happen in natural water such as lakes, rivers and oceans (CDC).
- **Card 2, Alcohol:** among teens and adults, alcohol is involved in up to 70% of deaths linked to water recreation (CDC). A CDC report notes that, in earlier studies it reviewed, 25% to 61% of people aged 15-34 said they drink alcohol around water.
- **Card 3, Life jackets:** in 2024, where life jacket use was known, 87% of people who drowned in boating incidents were not wearing one. Paddlecraft such as canoes, kayaks and paddleboards accounted for 26% of boating deaths (U.S. Coast Guard).
- **Card 4, Cold water:** sudden immersion can trigger gasping in water as warm as 77°F (National Weather Service). While hyperventilating, swimming even 6-10 feet is often impossible, even for good swimmers (National Center for Cold Water Safety).
- **Card 5, Who drowns:** nearly 80% of people who die from drowning in the U.S. are male (CDC). In 2020, the drowning rate for people 15-24 jumped 31.3% compared with 2019 (CDC).

### 3 Activity 2: Influences and emergency response 10 minutes

Whole-class discussion. Reveal the warm-up answers (all four are myths) and connect each to a card. Then cover what to do in an emergency.

- Ask: *Which influences push people your age to take risks near water?* (Friends, dares, alcohol, social media videos, overconfidence in pool skills.)
- Recognize trouble: a swimmer who is upright but can't move forward or tread water, or is face down and still, needs help now. Drowning is usually quiet.
- Respond: shout for help and call 911; reach or throw something that floats; don't go in unless you are trained.
- Train: drowning is a breathing emergency, so take a CPR course that includes rescue breaths. Red Cross, American Heart Association and local fire department classes are listed below.

### 4 Activity 3: Make a 30-second safety message 15 minutes

Teams write a 30-second video script, a social post or a poster aimed at people their age or a younger group. It must include one fact from a card, its source, and one specific action.

### 5 Assessment 5 minutes

Score the message with the rubric (1-3 points each, 12 total). Collect a one-line exit ticket: *One thing I'll do differently near water this year is ___ because ___.*

- **Accurate:** the fact matches the card exactly, with the year and qualifiers.
- **Sourced:** it names the source (CDC, U.S. Coast Guard, National Weather Service, Water Safety USA).
- **Actionable:** it gives one clear thing to do (wear a life jacket, skip the drinks, swim near a lifeguard, take CPR).
- **Respectful:** no fear tactics, jokes about drowning or blame.

### 6 Take-home

Students find one CPR class near them (links below) and check the life jackets at home or on a family boat before summer.

## Background for the teacher

**Why teens.** The American Academy of Pediatrics says adolescents may overestimate their swimming skills, misjudge the seriousness of water hazards or engage in risky and impulsive behaviors. CDC's 2024 Vital Signs report found the largest 2020 increase in drowning death rates among people aged 15-24 (up 31.3%), and cites earlier research finding that 25%-61% of people aged 15-34 report alcohol use around water. Read more in water safety for teens.

**Alcohol.** CDC says alcohol is involved in up to 70% of deaths associated with water recreation among teens and adults. Note for students: this is a different measure from the Coast Guard's figure for boating, so always name what a statistic measures. See alcohol and swimming.

**Life jackets.** The U.S. Coast Guard's 2024 report found that where life jacket use was known, 87% of people who drowned in boating incidents were not wearing one. The Red Cross says to always wear a life jacket while boating, regardless of swimming skill.

**Cold water.** The National Center for Cold Water Safety says that swimming even 6-10 feet while hyperventilating is often impossible, even for good swimmers. The National Weather Service says gasping can be triggered by water as warm as 77°F. See cold water shock.

**Emergency response.** The 2024 American Heart Association and AAP guidelines say resuscitation after drowning must focus on restoring breathing as much as circulation. Water Safety USA recommends learning CPR with both chest compressions and rescue breaths. This lesson does not teach CPR steps; send students to a certified course.

## Discussion questions

1. Card 1 says almost half of teens who drowned could swim. What does that tell you about pool skills versus lake or ocean skills?

2. Why might people your age drink around water even when they know the risk? What would make it easier to say no?
3. How can you tell if a statistic you see online is reliable? (Who published it, what year, what exactly it measures, and whether it links to the source.)
4. If you were planning a lake day with friends, what three things would you set up first?
5. What would you want a younger sibling to know before their first trip to the beach without you?

## Where students can get trained

- **CPR:** the American Red Cross offers online, blended and in-person classes, and the American Heart Association class finder lists courses by location. In New York City, the FDNY Free CPR Program teaches free 30-minute hands-only CPR and AED classes for groups. It is not a certification class, and it does not cover rescue breaths, so it is a good first step before a full course. More options in where to learn CPR.
- **Lifeguarding:** in NYC, NYC Parks Swim Prep gives free coaching to swimmers 16 and older preparing for the lifeguard qualifying test. Elsewhere, ask your local pool or the Red Cross about lifeguard classes.

## Teaching this topic with care

Some students may have lost someone to drowning or to an alcohol-related death. Tell families the topic in advance, don't show rescue or drowning videos, and allow students to choose a different card. Keep PSAs free of shock tactics and jokes; the rubric rewards respect. If a student seems distressed, follow your school's counseling referral process. Remind everyone they can call or text 988 any time to talk to someone.

## Follow-up ideas

- Test what the class learned with Drowning myths quiz.
- Post the best PSA posters next to the Drowning Is Quiet and the Reach or Throw, Don't Go before summer break.
- Invite students to share their messages with a younger class that is doing Water Safety Lesson Plan for Grades 6-8.

## About the standards

This lesson gives students practice with the 2024 National Health Education Standards listed below. It has not been formally reviewed for alignment, so check it against your state's health standards.

## What you can do today

Print the five data cards, book 50 minutes before the summer break, and find one CPR class near your school that students could join. Share reach or throw, don't go with your school's coaches and club advisors too.

## Standards

- NHES 2: Analyze influences that affect health and well-being of self and others. https://shapeamerica.org/standards/health/new-he-standards/
- NHES 3: Access valid and reliable resources to support health and well-being of self and others. https://shapeamerica.org/standards/health/new-he-standards/
- NHES 8: Advocate to promote health and well-being of self and others. https://shapeamerica.org/standards/health/new-he-standards/

## Sources


1. Life Jackets Save Lives, Water Safety USA. https://www.watersafetyusa.org/life-jackets-save-lives.html
2. Risk Factors for Drowning, CDC. https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/risk-factors/index.html
3. Vital Signs: Drowning Death Rates, Self-Reported Swimming Skill, Swimming Lesson Participation, and Recreational Water Exposure, United States, 2019-2023, CDC (MMWR). https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/73/wr/mm7320e1.htm
4. Recreational Boating Statistics 2024, U.S. Coast Guard. https://uscgboating.org/library/accident-statistics/Recreational-Boating-Statistics-2024.pdf
5. Cold Water Hazards and Safety, National Weather Service. https://www.weather.gov/safety/coldwater
6. Cold Shock, National Center for Cold Water Safety. https://www.coldwatersafety.org/cold-shock
7. AAP Releases Updated Drowning Prevention Recommendations, American Academy of Pediatrics (HealthyChildren.org). https://www.healthychildren.org/English/news/Pages/AAP-releases-updated-drowning-prevention-recommendations.aspx
8. Water Safety, American Red Cross. https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/water-safety.html
9. Preventing Drowning, CDC. https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/prevention/index.html
10. 2024 AHA and AAP Focused Update on Special Circumstances: Resuscitation Following Drowning, American Heart Association and American Academy of Pediatrics. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39530204/
11. Water Competency, Water Safety USA. https://www.watersafetyusa.org/water-competency.html
12. CPR Training & Certification, American Red Cross. https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class/cpr
13. Atlas: Find a Class, American Heart Association. https://atlas.heart.org/
14. FDNY Free CPR Program, FDNY (City of New York). https://www.nyc.gov/site/fdny/education/cpr/be-911-cpr-program.page
15. Swim Prep, NYC Parks. https://www.nycgovparks.org/events/swim-prep
16. National Health Education Standards (2024), SHAPE America. https://shapeamerica.org/standards/health/new-he-standards/



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