

Lifesaving Tip – How to spot a Rip current!

When waves break on a beach, they push water towards the shoreline. Once that water reaches the shore, it has to find a way to get back out to sea, and it does this by flowing downwards into deeper channels in the surf zone. Once the water is in these deeper areas, it can flow back out to sea away from the shoreline. These deeper channels are called rip currents.



Rip currents are the **number 1** hazard on Australian beaches being responsible for at least 21 drownings on average per year, as well as being the cause of many rescues. Rip currents often lead to drowning when swimmers attempt to fight the current trying to swim directly back to the shoreline, become exhausted and begin to panic.

Rip currents can also be deadly for non-swimmers as a person standing in waist deep water can be dragged into the deeper waters of the rip current, where they can drown if they are unable to swim and are not wearing or holding a flotation device.

How do you spot a rip current?

The key signs to look for are:

- Deeper darker water
- Fewer breaking waves
- Sometimes sandy coloured water extending beyond the surf zone
- Debris or seaweed
- Sometimes it's easier to look for where the waves are breaking consistently, and then look to each side where they don't break consistently. That's the rip current!

Rip Current Survival

- If you get caught in a rip current, you need to know your options:
- 1. For assistance, stay calm, float and raise an arm to attract attention.
- 2. While floating, rip currents may flow in a circular pattern and return you to an adjacent sandbar.

- 3. You may escape the rip current by swimming parallel to the beach, towards the breaking waves.
- 4. You should regularly assess your situation. If your response is ineffective, you may need to adopt an alternative such as staying calm, floating and raising an arm to attract attention.

Common misconceptions about rip currents

1. Rips are not *an undertow*.

Studies have confirmed that rip currents do not pull people under water causing them to drown. They simply take a person away from the beach, often eventually back into the wave zone. Rip current related drowning deaths are therefore due to variable factors including:

- a. Ability to swim
- b. The instinctive nature to attempt to swim directly back into shore against the rip current which leads to fatigue,
- c. The panic which results and the impairment of judgment,
- d. Not attending a patrolled beach where services are able to assist/rescue.

2. Rip currents can be hazardous all the time, not just when there are large surf conditions

When waves are larger the speed of the rip current is also higher resulting in increased risk. However, when these conditions exist less people typically enter the water. It's on days when the surf is moderate that more drowning deaths occur as more people go swimming.

3. Calm water is not always 'safe' water

Many people end up in a rip current as a result of choosing to swim in an area of calm water on the beach. Unfortunately, where rip currents start on the shore, the water often has a calmer appearance with ripples on the surface indicating a subtle flow of water out to sea. The best area to swim is between the red and yellow flags to ensure you are under supervision of lifeguards.

4. Rip currents can be used wisely depending on your ability in the surf environment

Lifesavers and lifeguards use rip currents to get to people in trouble more quickly and surfers often use a rip current to get out through the wave zone. However, in order to do this, it takes years of training and experience and caution must always be taken.

5. There is no such thing as a "rip tide"

Rip currents are sometimes referred to as 'rip tides', which is misleading as tides refer to water level changes over a period of 6-12 hours, whereas rip currents are currents moving over a period of seconds, minutes and hours.

The best thing you can do is stay out of rip current in the first place! The best ways to do this are:

- ***Always swim between the red and yellow flags***
- ***Learn how to spot rip currents and avoid them***