May 23, 2019

It's Summertime, Florida! Keep it Safe and Healthy at the Beach, Lake, River or Spring

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DeFuniak Springs, Fla. — In 2018, Florida set a tourism record for the eighth consecutive year drawing 126.1 million out-of-state visitors, and this year AAA ranks Orlando as the number one summer destination in the world! With Florida poised to break another tourism record and many residents looking forward to holiday weekends and vacations, the Florida Department of Health (FDOH) encourages everyone to maximize the health benefits and fun of days spent in and around Florida's waters: play it safe and keep it healthy. "We are proud to be the home of so many vacation destinations and encourage all residents and visitors to exercise healthy and safe practices when enjoying Walton County's wonderful beaches, lakes, rivers, and springs. Remember to use sunscreen, stay hydrated, practice water safety, prevent injury, and be respectful and aware of the animals and organisms that call our county home" said Holly Holt, Health Officer.

Beach Swimming, Lake Swimming and Everywhere In-Between

It's obvious that swimming in open water is different than swimming in a pool but most people are not aware how vastly different swimming in open water is. Even the strongest swimmer can get in trouble swimming in open water. That's why everyone—children, teens and adults—should never swim alone and always use the buddy system when swimming.

Parents know to supervise their small children, but older children—this includes teens—need to be watched, too. Children ages 1–4 are more likely to drown in home swimming pools and children ages 5–19 are more likely to drown in natural bodies of water. Someone watching from the shore who is aware of where swimmers are at all times is an important layer of protection.

Other measures can add layers of protection:

- Attention to safety signs and flags can help swimmers avoid dangerous conditions and currents like rip tide—weather.gov/forecast delivers beach forecasts and current statements by ZIP code.
- Open cuts or wounds should not be immersed in water; if there's bacteria in the water, they can enter the body through a cut or wound. Water should not be swallowed as well.
- A cut or wound that happens when swimming, wading or boating should be washed with clean, running water and soap, and covered with a clean, dry waterproof bandage.

A Few Extra Precautions for Swimming in Warm Freshwater and Hot Springs

It's not safe to take in warm freshwater through the nose. Swimmers should wear nose clips or avoid putting their heads underwater. Digging in or stirring up mud and scum should be avoided.

Florida's Waters are Natural Places—Some More Wild than Others

All of Florida's natural waters are home to aquatic life, land animals and plants that should not be approached or touched by people. Swimmers, waders and boaters should also stay away from red tides and algal blooms like blue green algae (cyanobacteria) that occur naturally. Both can cause skin irritation, burning eyes, and throat and breathing irritations.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission posts the status of red tide locations and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection monitors blue green algae.

Mosquitoes are another familiar part of Florida's summer landscape. Lightweight clothing that covers arms and legs, and mosquito repellent, can keep pesky bites to a minimum. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency keeps a current listing of safe and reliable repellents. For best results, follow all label directions.

Walking barefoot on beaches, piers, lakeshores and rivers is not a good idea. The risk for injury—stepping on sharp objects, slipping on mossy rocks, tripping on uneven trails—is high. Shoes should match the activity.

Sun's Up, Cover Up

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), skin cancer is the most common cancer in the U.S. In 2015, 6,484 melanoma cases, the most dangerous form of skin cancer, were reported in Florida.

The best way to protect skin is to cover with sunscreen, shade and clothing. FDOH recommends using a sunscreen with a UVA/UVB SPF 15 or higher. Sunscreen is most effective when it's reapplied every two hours.

Shade breaks taken throughout the day, especially between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. when the sun is strongest, limits sun exposure.

While hats and sunglasses are standard beach attire, adults and children should also cover up with lightweight clothing. Swim shirts are a good idea. Many carry a UPF (ultraviolet protection factor) rating of 50+ that blocks out over 98 percent of the sun's harmful rays.

When using sunscreen with insect repellent, apply sunscreen first.

Beat the Heat

Anyone can suffer from heat exhaustion so it's important to know the symptoms: headaches, dizziness, weakness, lightheadedness, irritability or confusion, upset stomach and vomiting. Heat exhaustion can lead to heat stroke—the most serious form of heat injury.

Dress for the heat: the same lightweight, loose-fitting clothing worn to cover up from the sun, can also reflect heat and sunlight if it's light-colored. This type of covering helps the body maintain normal temperatures.

Drinking plenty of water before thirst sets in and avoiding alcohol will keep the body hydrated. Heavy meals will increase body temperature.

Food Safety Tips for the Outdoors

Food preparation and food safety go hand-in-hand. The rising summer temperatures enjoyed outside are the same temperatures that cause foodborne germs to flourish.

Raw meat and ready-to-eat food should be kept in separate insulated and chilled coolers (kept at 41° F or below). StateFoodSafety.com advises using clean plates and utensils when switching food preparation to cooking to avoid cross-contamination between raw food and cooked food. Using clean plates throughout the meal also keeps plates fresh and avoids cross-contamination between foods that have been sitting out in the temperature danger zone (41°F–135°F) and fresh foods.

A food thermometer is the best tool to ensure meat is cooked hot enough to kill harmful germs. The CDC's "Get Ready to Grill Safely" is a helpful checklist for keeping food transport and preparation safe.

Leftovers should be saved in small portions and refrigerated within two hours of cooking. If outside temperatures are greater than 90°F, leftovers should be refrigerated within one hour of cooking. Food left out more than two hours should be thrown out.

FDOH reminds everyone preparing food to wash their hands with soap and clean, running water before and after handling raw meat, poultry and seafood, and to wash work surfaces, utensils and grills before cooking. Hands should be washed after using the bathroom or changing a diaper, coughing, sneezing or playing with a pet.

About the Florida Department of Health

The department, nationally accredited by the Public Health Accreditation Board, works to protect, promote and improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county and community efforts.

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