

# Practical tips for staying safe outdoors



PHOTO COURTESY U.S. COAST GUARD

Staying safe while fishing and boating means being aware and planning ahead. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Get Outdoors Florida! have plenty of tips and programs to help you enjoy your time on the water safely.



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission  
MyFWC.com



PHOTO COURTESY U.S. COAST GUARD

Recreational fishing is one of our most beloved and traditional ways to relax, get outdoors and perhaps even catch a healthy dinner – all while having fun. It also is a great way to spend quality time with family or friends. Although comparatively safe relative to many sports and daily activities, an accident of any kind while on a fishing trip can turn a great day sour.

## Boating

Boaters in Florida enjoy about 22 million recreational boating trips here each year. With about 2 million registered and nonregistered boats using Florida's waters, our waterways are becoming increasingly busy. This makes being safe and courteous on the water more important than ever. There were 620 reportable boating accidents (involving a fatality, lost boater or more than \$2,000 in damage) and 65 boating-related fatalities in Florida in 2009 – by far the most significant safety concern for anglers. Yet only about one in 35,000 trips results in a reportable accident.

Most boating-related deaths were due to victims falling overboard or capsizing their boat and drowning, and many happened close to shore. Many of the deaths could have been prevented if the victims had worn life jackets and used a kill-switch for their motor. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Coast Guard

promote everyone on any boat always wearing a properly fitted life jacket. Coast Guard-approved life jackets are now better looking and more comfortable, and include auto-inflating belt packs or inflatable suspenders that don't interfere with boating and fishing activities.

Alcohol remains a leading contributor to boating incidents. Don't drink and boat.

Boat operators can help keep themselves and their passengers safe by taking boating education courses. Anyone born on or after January 1, 1988 must have a Boating Safety Education ID Card to legally operate a boat in Florida. In addition, get a free Vessel Safety Check, which is provided by the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary and U.S. Power Squadron. Remember to constantly look out for other boats and obstructions, and maintain 360° vigilance all around you.

Since internal combustion engines emit carbon monoxide (CO), an odorless, poisonous gas, you must ensure sufficient ventilation and use CO detectors in enclosed areas. In the early stages, symptoms of CO poisoning are similar to seasickness, but CO can kill in minutes.

Whether boating or just playing around the water, being able to swim or knowing how to stay afloat is important. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides "Healthy Swimming and Recreational Water Facts." Most drownings of people more than 15 years of age occur in natural water settings. With younger children, pools and the home are a greater risk. Know what to do to reduce risks around the water, including being familiar with basic first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

## Weather

Before going fishing or boating, check the weather forecast. Strong winds and thunderstorms with lightning are dangerous. Obey warnings represented by colored beach flags and small boat advisories. Common beach warning flags are: Double Red means the beach is closed; Single Red signals a high hazard (e.g., strong surf or currents); Yellow indicates



JOE RICHARD/SEAFAVORITES.COM

a medium hazard; Green designates calm conditions; Purple with either Red or Yellow signals the presence of dangerous marine life such as jellyfish (not sharks).

Florida is the lightning capital of the U.S. More than twice as many lightning-related deaths and injuries are reported here than in any other state. During the past 50 years, an annual average of nearly 10 people have died by lightning strikes in Florida. Be particularly aware of lightning from June through August. If you see lightning and are on the water, get off (or out). If you are on land, seek shelter in a building or a car. If you must take shelter outdoors, avoid isolated trees and don't be the highest point. If your skin begins to tingle, a lightning strike may be imminent. Quickly bend your knees and lean forward with your feet together and hands on your knees to make yourself as small and low a target as possible, while minimizing contact with the ground. Don't lie flat!

There is no such thing as a lightning-proof boat. Small boats with metal hulls can dissipate a lightning strike better than wood or fiberglass boats. When lightning strikes a small, non-metal boat, the electricity seeks the quickest route to ground, and the human body is an excellent conductor. Small fiberglass boats, especially sailboats, are particularly vulnerable to lightning strikes since any projection above the surface of the water acts as a lightning rod. These boats should be protected by properly designed and connected systems of lightning protection.

Stay in the center of the cabin if the boat has one, otherwise stay low in the boat. Keep arms and legs out of the water, and always stop fishing, skiing, diving, swimming or other water activities when weather conditions look threatening. Before a storm arrives, disconnect electronic equipment and lower radio antennas or other protruding devices. Do not touch electronic equipment, including the radio, during a storm.

## Dehydration

In Florida, dehydration can be a major concern for anglers and boaters. Water is your best choice, although sports drinks can help replenish lost electrolytes. Don't wait until you feel thirsty or have a headache. Drink plenty of water before, during and after your excursion. Caffeinated and alcoholic beverages tend to cause dehydration and aren't sufficient to maintain proper hydration.

## Heat stroke

High temperatures pose a direct threat to people outdoors. Proper hydration and protecting skin from sun exposure can help prevent problems. Heat exhaustion precedes heat stroke. This happens in hot, humid conditions when people lose too much fluid through sweating, causing the body to overheat. Their temperature may be elevated, but below 104°F. They may be pale, sweating profusely

and have muscle cramps or feel faint with headache, weakness, thirst and nausea. Immediately get them cooled off and rehydrated and watch for symptoms of heat stroke. Heat stroke is a true medical emergency; it occurs once the body's cooling mechanism (primarily perspiration) fails and results in shock-like conditions. A person's core temperature can quickly exceed 104°F, they can lose consciousness or be dizzy and confused, their skin becomes flushed, hot and dry. Ice them down and get them to a doctor as quickly as possible; coma, brain damage and death can occur if not treated immediately.

## Hypothermia

At the other extreme, hypothermia can be a concern, even in the Sunshine State. Being wet significantly increases the rate of heat loss from the body. Take shelter from wind, since the wind-chill factor can dramatically increase the chances of hypothermia. Body temperatures can drop to dangerously low levels at air temperatures of 50°F or more in wet and windy weather, or in 60°F to 70°F water. Mild hypothermia with shivering, cold, pale or blue-gray skin, apathy, slurred speech or numb hands and feet, can usually be treated by getting warm and dry using conventional means. Advanced hypothermia symptoms include being cold to the touch, stiff muscles, a slow pulse, slow and shallow breathing, violent shivering, sleepiness and confusion. These can lead to loss of consciousness. With a body temperature of 90°F, shivering may stop. At this point, hypothermia is an emergency condition – get the patient warm and quickly transport to a medical facility.



STINGRAY

## Fish spines, teeth and gill covers

Although most recreational fish are relatively harmless, if you handle them carelessly you could suffer an injury. Be aware of sharp teeth in fish like snappers, shark, barracuda or bowfin, and keep your hands out of their mouths. Catfish and other fish have hard, sharp spines that can accidentally stick you. Stingrays have a special defense mechanism – a spine at the base of their tail – that is especially painful if you get “stung.” Some fish, such as snook, have hard, sharp gill covers that can cut an unwary angler.

Clean any wounds thoroughly with soap and water, and remove any debris. With a stingray or catfish spine injury, soaking the injured area in hot water (113°F) for 30-90 minutes may neutralize the painful effects of the sting. Oral pain medication such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil) can be given if the person is not vomiting and is not allergic to it.

## Insects

Watch for spiders and wasps in any brushy areas as well as the underside of boats that are stored overturned or covered. When bank fishing, be aware of fire ant and wasp nests. West Nile virus, equine encephalitis and malaria are mosquito-borne, and ticks can sometimes carry Lyme disease. Wear long pants, socks and long-sleeved shirts in the early morning or evening when mosquitoes are active. Permethrin-containing repellents are recommended for use on clothing, shoes, and camping gear. Applying formulations containing less than 35 percent DEET to the skin are recommended to repel mosquitoes, ticks and other arthropods.

Treatment of insect bites is generally simple. Clean the area with soap and water. If there is redness or pain, ice may help. [www.WebMD.com](http://www.WebMD.com) suggests treating itchiness at the site of a bite with an over-the-counter antihistamine such as Benadryl in cream or pill form. Calamine lotion also helps relieve itching. However, if an individual exhibits wheezing, difficulty breathing or dizziness, they may be having an allergic reaction. A person with these symptoms should be immediately seen by a doctor to prevent anaphylaxis. Patients known to have allergic reactions should carry a kit with an epinephrine injector (EpiPen) and antihistamine.

## Snakes

The main venomous reptile that might be encountered by anglers is the cottonmouth (water moccasin). This species is found in marshes, swamps and lakes. However,



COTTONMOUTH/KEVIN ENGE

nonvenomous brown water snakes are much more common. In either case, simply give them a wide berth and leave them alone. In the rare event someone is actually bitten by a snake, remain calm, wash the bite with soap and water, immobilize the bitten area and keep it below the heart, then seek medical attention to prevent infection. DO NOT cut into the wound, use ice, electric shock or tourniquets for the wound.



AMERICAN ALLIGATOR

## Alligators

As with snakes, simply leave them alone and maintain a respectful distance. Never feed alligators. It is illegal because it causes them to lose their fear of people and to come close looking for handouts. This may result in a nuisance gator that must be removed or eradicated. Don't swim or wade in areas containing large alligators, especially around twilight or at night, and don't tow a fish stringer in the water behind you.

## Sharks

As with alligators, snakes and most other animals perceived as dangerous, people are a much bigger threat to them than they are to us. Fatal attacks in Florida occur on average only once every seven years. Nationally the risk of death from a shark attack is 1 in 3,748,067, versus 1 in 79,746 for dying from a lightning strike. Don't harass sharks, and if you catch one inadvertently, be careful of its jaws and release it unharmed, preferably without bringing it into your boat. If you can't safely and easily remove the hook, carefully cutting the line close to its mouth will usually enable the shark to recover.

## Jellyfish

Jellyfish possess stinging cells (nematocysts) located on their tentacles and other body parts. Jellyfish are occasionally encountered by anglers and boaters. Even jellyfish that have washed ashore should not be handled,

since the stinging cells may still fire. The stings of some jellyfish can be quite painful, causing reactions ranging from mild rashes to death (in extreme allergic-reaction instances). Although most jellyfish are harmless to human beings, avoiding contact is always the best choice.

If stung, remove any tentacles with a stick or pair of tweezers (preferably wear gloves) then soak or rinse the area in vinegar (acetic acid) for 15-30 minutes to stop the nematocysts from releasing toxins. Alternatives are using 70 percent isopropyl alcohol or flushing the site with seawater. Do not use fresh water, rub the area, apply ice or hot water – all of which cause the release of more toxin. You can apply shaving cream or a paste of baking soda to the area and then gently scrape with a credit card to remove additional nematocysts. The shaving cream or paste prevents nematocysts that have not been activated from releasing toxin. Then, reapply vinegar or alcohol.

## Hook removal

The simplest way to remove a hook is to loop a strong cord through the bend of the hook (dental floss works well), press down on the eye of the hook, and then give a sharp pull straight back on the cord. Wash the wound with soap and water and apply an antiseptic ointment. Seek medical assistance if the wound is deep or shows signs of infection, and keep your tetanus vaccination up-to-date.

## Conclusion

We have covered a wide variety of potential hazards, not to scare you, but to help you be prepared and to put risks in perspective. Fishing and boating are safe, if you use common sense, are aware of your surroundings and are prepared to deal with any hazards. Active nature-based recreation also has been shown to lead to happier, healthier and even smarter lifestyles, while increasing stewardship of our natural environment. So Get Outdoors, Florida!, and enjoy nature!

*Note: Most of the health advice provided here comes from [www.firstaid.WebMD.com](http://www.firstaid.WebMD.com).*

Discover new adventures, outdoor activities and wild creatures at [FloridaWildlifeMagazine.com](http://FloridaWildlifeMagazine.com)



[GetOutdoorsFlorida.org](http://GetOutdoorsFlorida.org)