Facts about rip currents

◆ Rip current speeds vary. Average speeds are 1-2 feet per second, but they have been measured as fast as 8 feet per second—faster than an Olympic swimmer!

◆ Rip currents can be very narrow or more than 50 yards wide.

◆ Sometimes a rip current ends just beyond the line of breaking waves; however, others may continue to flow hundreds of yards offshore.

◆ Rip currents do not pull people under the water—they pull people away from shore.

◆ Rip currents are sometimes mistakenly called undertow or riptides but these terms are not correct. Only the term rip currents is technically correct.

Safety tips

◆ Know how to swim.

◆ Never swim alone.

◆ If in doubt, don’t go out.

◆ Swim near a lifeguard.

Where can I get more information about rip currents?

◆ Before you leave for the beach, check the latest National Weather Service forecast for local beach conditions.

◆ When you arrive at the beach, ask lifeguards about rip currents and other hazards.

◆ More information about rip currents can be found at the following web sites:
  - weather.gov/safety/ripcurrent
  - usla.org/ripcurrents

United States Lifesaving Association statistics indicate that the chance of death by drowning at a beach protected by lifeguards is 1 in 18 million.
Rip currents account for more than 80% of rescues performed by surf beach lifeguards.

What are rip currents?
- Rip currents are channelized currents of water flowing away from shore at surf beaches.
- Rip currents typically form at breaks in sandbars, and also near structures such as jetties and piers.
- Rip currents are commonly found on all surf beaches, including Great Lakes beaches.

Why are rip currents dangerous?
- Rip currents pull people away from shore.
- Rip current speeds can vary from moment to moment and can quickly increase to become dangerous to anyone entering the surf.
- Rip currents can sweep even the strongest swimmer away from shore.

What are clues that a rip current may be present?
- A narrow gap of darker, seemingly calmer water between areas of breaking waves and whitewater.
- A channel of churning, choppy water.
- A difference in water color.
- A line of foam, seaweed or debris moving seaward.

What if I’m caught in a rip current?
- Relax, rip currents don’t pull you under.
- Don’t swim against the current.
- You may be able to escape by swimming out of the current in a direction following the shoreline, or toward breaking waves, then at an angle toward the beach.
- You may be able to escape by floating or treading water if the current circulates back toward shore.
- If you feel you will be unable to reach shore, draw attention to yourself. If you need help, yell and wave for assistance.

How do I help someone else?
Don’t become a victim while trying to help someone else!
- Many people have died trying to rescue rip current victims.
- Get help from a lifeguard.
- If a lifeguard is not present, call 9-1-1, then try to direct the victim to swim following the shoreline to escape.
- If possible, throw the rip current victim something that floats.
- Never enter the water without a flotation device.

Rip currents are powerful currents of water moving away from shore. They can sweep even the strongest swimmer away from shore. If at all possible, swim near a lifeguard.

Rip currents often form near coastal structures.

Rip currents are channelized currents of water flowing away from shore.

Rip currents sometimes generate a plume of visible sediment moving away from shore.

A lifeguard rescues a swimmer caught in a rip current.

Dr. Tom Herrington, Stevens Institute of Technology
Lifeguard Captain Nick Steers, County of Los Angeles Fire Department

Courtesy of Discovery Communications