



## A Lifeguard's Beach Safety Tips

by Sgt. Ed Fisher  
Special to the Dispatch

*The writer is a 17-year veteran of the Beach patrol. In the off-season, he is an elementary school teacher in Montgomery County. The OCBP consist of over 200 men and women dedicated to ocean rescue and maintaining a safe and orderly environment on Ocean City's beach. The Sure Rescue Technicians guard the beach seven days a week from 10 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.*



### Riding Waves if Fun

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Riding waves is fun. It is something that the Polynesians have done for over a thousand years, and it is undoubtedly one of the main reasons many people come to Ocean City. Whether it is body surfing, boogie boarding, or surfing at our surfing beaches, riding the waves is one of the least expensive and fun things you can do at the beach.

However, it recent weeks heavy surf conditions, and at times shallow low tides, have made riding waves dangerous. In the past two weeks the Ocean City Beach Patrol has had over 50 impact injuries as a result of people being slammed into the sandbar by heavy surf. To be more specific there have been 24 suspected neck or back injuries. Fifteen of these neck and back injuries involved a trip to the hospital, and three of them were serious enough that the victim had to be flown to a shock-trauma center (due to the care they received all are expected to make a full recovery). The Ocean City Beach Patrol has also responded to 15 emergencies that involved dislocated shoulders or knees. While a few of these incidents involved people that were wading in the water, the majority of the incidents involved people that were either body surfing or boogie boarding. None of the accidents involved a surfer.

This may all seem a bit shocking, but it is important for people to realize the ocean is powerful and unpredictable and may be dangerous. However, there are precautions you can and should take. During the two-week period of heavy surf our lifeguards were very busy talking to beach patrons about the dangers of the heavy surf. The guards were continually pulling everyone out of the water and trying to educate as many people as possible about the conditions. Furthermore, lifeguards were writing safety messages on the back of their stands regarding the heavy surf. Captain Arbin was also busy talking to the press about these dangerous conditions.

In all cases we have two important rules to keep you safe. First, only go in the ocean when the Beach Patrol is on duty and secondly, talk to your lifeguard about current conditions. If you are body boarding take precautions after speaking to the lifeguard about the conditions before entering the water. If the surf is heavy (bigger than 3 or 4 feet) and the tide is low do not consider boarding unless you are a very skilled boarder with proper equipment. It is also important to know your limits. If you are an inexperienced boogie boarder or not in great physical condition you should not consider going out in heavy surf. If you experience any trouble, stay on your board because it will keep you afloat. We often see people get in trouble and ditch their floatation device in a panic.

Body surfing is considered the purist form of wave riding and can be great fun. But there are precautions to take. Once again, speak to the lifeguard about the conditions before entering the water. Second, if the surf is bigger than 3 or 4 feet you should not

consider bodysurfing. The impact of waves bigger than that can be devastating. Lastly, know your limits and if in doubt don't go out.



### **Captain's Note:**

The most common culprit of neck injuries results from swimmers that are body surfing or body boarding incorrectly or in unsafe conditions. The proper technique for riding a wave is get in front of the wave so it is pushing you out in front and finish your ride before running out of water. Body boarding on the top of a breaking wave may cause you to be propelled to the ocean floor (we call this going over the falls). To prevent this, stay on the rear half of the board and if you need to bailout, go off the back of the board. The proper way to body surf a wave is to have your hands out in front of your body; this allows for more control of movement in the water. The most dangerous condition exists when we are experiencing shore break. Shore break occurs when waves rather than breaking on the sandbar continue to build and crash with full force on the shore with little or no water depth. When unsuspecting victims find themselves on a breaking wave and they are being thrown into shallow water they have set themselves up for a tragedy. NEVER ride a wave during shore break conditions or play in the impact zone!

Although education and prevention are the primary focus of the Beach Patrol mission, SRTs (lifeguards) are well trained and prepared to handle severe neck and back injuries (although we prefer preventing injuries before they occur). Our Beach Patrol developed and modified a technique of removing victims with suspected neck or back injuries out of deep and or shallow water. The technique has been refined over many years of training and usage from its introduction as a technique developed in Hawaii. The modified technique is unique to our agency but has developed with input from the medical community and emergency providers. It has been approved by MIEMS as a state standard with the Ocean City Beach Patrol as the only organization that is certified to teach other first responders and organizations in this technique.

On land it is always best not to move a person who may have a back injury. In the ocean the movement of the waves makes leaving the victim in the surf to possibly sustain more injuries impossible. Using backboards in the surf zone can actually cause more damage to a victim. Beach Patrol guards are taught how to effectively and carefully extract a victims from the surf who are



suspected to have serious spinal injuries. Guards work as a team to carry a victim to safety while minimizing movement to the head, neck, and back. Never underestimate the power of the ocean, keep yourself and your loved ones safe by always checking with the SRT on duty about daily surf conditions at your beach!

Photo above taken by Kristin Josen

***The OCBP trains all SRTs in neck back injury victim removal. Here the first guard on the scene is supporting the neck as he makes his way back to shore. Other guards arrive on the scene to assist in the victim removal and support of the back and neck. The victim will remain stabilized on the beach until paramedics arrive.***