

THE NATIONAL DROWNING REPORT 2002

251 PEOPLE DROWNED LAST YEAR!

National trends suggest that 251 people drowned in preventable water related activities during the financial year 2001/02. This figure represents a four percent decrease on the five year average. Even though the population of Australia during this period had a seven percent increase the drowning number decreased. The death rate per 100,000 people decreased from a five year average of 1.40 to 1.28 for the 2001/02 financial year, a decrease of nine percent (see figure 1).

With the 2002/03 summer shaping up to be hot and dry, public awareness and some simple rules such as making sure the gate to the pool is always closed will help to avoid further preventable water related deaths. Remember, whenever you or your family are in, on or near water, 'keep watch' and help prevent further lives from being lost.

Drowning in rivers/oceans/harbours is up on the five year average (see figure 2). The activities these people were undertaking at the time were generally fishing (particularly rock fishing), walking or playing near the water, boating, diving and swimming. Rural waterways continue to be of concern. The flat, calm appearance of lakes and rivers often gives the false impression of tranquillity and safety.

People drowning at beaches are up by nearly 20% on the five year average. Swimming, fishing and diving or snorkelling were the main activities people were undertaking at the time of their drowning at these locations. People should always swim between the red and yellow flags and undertake all water related activities with a friend.

Swimming pools and bathtubs also displayed a high proportion of drowning incidents with 32 and 21 deaths recorded respectively. One quarter of all people drowning in swimming pools are children aged 0-4 years. Often children in this age group are left unsupervised or the child quickly and quietly finds their way into the pool and drowns.



Royal Life Saving

THE ROYAL LIFE SAVING SOCIETY AUSTRALIA

WHO DROWNS IN AUSTRALIA?

Compared to the five year average the 0-5 years, 15-24 years, 35-44 years, 55-64 years and 95+ years age groups are all down. However, 6-14 years, 25-34 years and 45-54 years age groups are up on the five year average (see figure 5).

The greatest decrease was in the 55-64 years age group, down by 22% on the five year average, other significant gains were in the 15-24 years age group and 0-5 years age groups down by 20% and 17% respectively. The largest increase was in the 45-54 years age group up 19% on the five year average. The other age group with a large increase was the 6-14 years age group up 17% on the 5 year average. The two most common activities that people in the 6-14 years age group were undertaking at the time of drowning were playing or walking near water and swimming.

Continued page 3

AUSTRALIAN DROWNINGS ON THE DECREASE

Accidental Drowning and Submersion Deaths and Rates, 1996-2000 and 2001/02

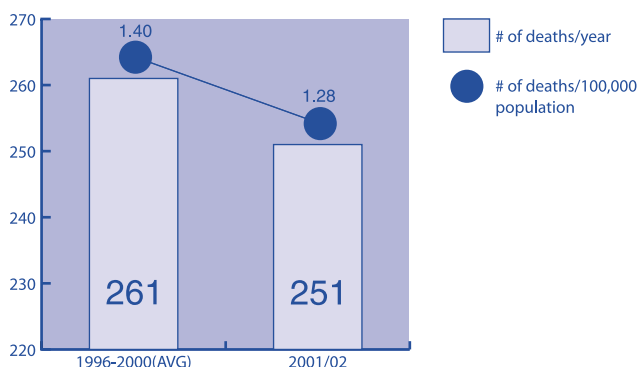


Figure 1

WATERWAYS DOMINATE DROWNINGS

Water Related Deaths by Location

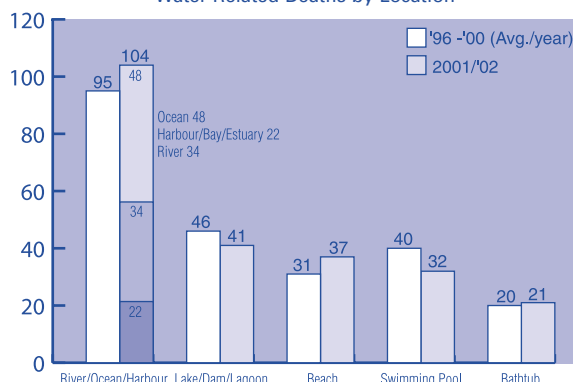


Figure 2

THE 0 - 5 YEAR AGE GROUP.

Early indicators for 2001/02 financial year suggest that 44 Australian children five years or younger drowned (see figure 3.). The good news is this figure is down by 25% on the five year average. However, 44 young lives lost in preventable water related incidents are far too many. Seventy five percent of drowning deaths in the 0-5 years age group were due to the child falling or wandering into the water. Whilst pleased with the reduction against the five year average, the increase from the previous financial year is worrying and the message from Royal Life Saving is that children need to be kept under constant supervision when near water. Remember "KEEP WATCH" at all times.

For every drowning death in this age group there were approximately three to four children admitted to hospital as a result of an immersion incident. In Australia, this equates to about 132 "near-drowned" children. Every one of these immersion incidents is a potential death.

rivers, ocean or harbour up 800%. Of the eight children who drowned in rivers, ocean or harbour, six were in rivers, increasing the total number of children drowning in rural waterways to 43% of all toddlers who drowned (see figure 4.). With the downward trend of toddlers drowning in swimming pools, we are now seeing a disturbing increase in toddlers drowning in inland waterways. In all cases, supervision is the difference between life and death.

Swimming pools continue to pose a great threat to toddlers' lives. Based on research of drowning patterns over the five years 1996-2000, 58% of toddlers' who drowned did so in back yard swimming pools and bathtubs (see figure 4). Research indicates that the toddler often gained access to the backyard swimming pool via direct access due to there being no pool fence or an obstructed or faulty gate.

TODDLER DROWNINGS

0-5 Age Group Water-Related Deaths 1995/96-2001/02

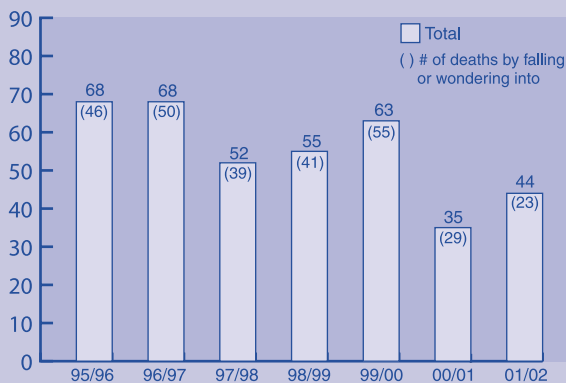


Figure 3

TODDLER DROWNINGS

0-5 Age Group Water-Related Deaths by Location 1996-2000 and 2001/02

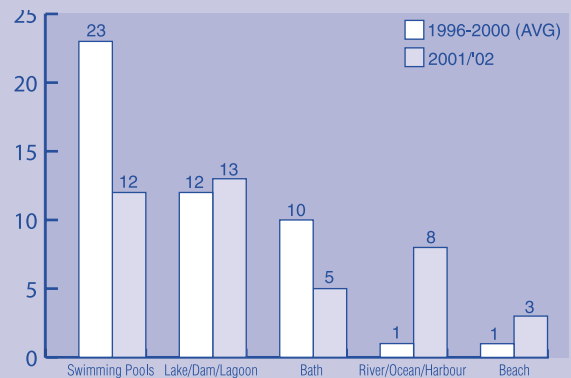


Figure 4

Studies have shown that between 5% and 20% of children who are admitted to hospital have suffered some form of brain damage, ranging from mild to severe.

Despite the widespread public education programs throughout the media, child care centres and in hospitals, too many children are being lost in preventable water related accidents. Evidence suggests that the more targeted approach employed by the Royal Life Saving Pfizer Keep Watch program has been successful in effecting behavioural change of parents and carers. Keep Watch and keep them alive.

The toddler drowning figure shows a disturbing increase in the number drowning in rural areas (ie lakes and dams) and a large increase from the five year average for

0-5 YEARS FIGURES MAKE UP OVER 18% OF THE TOTAL DROWNING FIGURE

Over the period 1996-2000 and 2001/02, the 0-5 years age group figure makes up over 18% of the total drowning figure. The 0-5 years figures have long been a national disgrace, and although a slight decrease has emerged, it is far too early to declare victory. For the 0-5 years age group 88% of children who drowned resulted from the child wandering off and falling into the water resulting in a submersion incident. This reinforces the message of "Keep Watch" whenever children are in, on or around water environments.

KEEP WATCH AND KEEP THEM ALIVE!

"Who Drowns in Australia" – Continued from page 1

The 0-5 years age group figures have decreased significantly, but remain unacceptably high. The five year average continues to indicate one child between the ages of 0 and 5 years drowns every week in this country.

Positive results have been recorded in the 15-24 years age group and the 35-44 years age groups with a decrease against the five-year average. The knowledge and skills learnt during the school years, combined with continued public education campaigns targeting these age groups appear to be having an effect.

This year 79% of all people who drowned in Australia were males. Young males in particular continue to participate in risk taking activities that can often end disastrously. Drowning is the third most common unintentional injury cause of death in Australia for males, after transport accidents and falls.

THE NATIONAL FORECAST

This is the eighth annual National Drowning Report produced by Royal Life Saving, and despite increased education, public awareness campaigns and water safety programs, many Australians underestimate or remain unaware of the dangers associated with recreational water participation. Disturbingly, the national trends remain inappropriately high (see figure 6).

With a growing population, and long term trends forecasting warmer weather, strong ongoing drowning prevention programs, education, training and awareness are needed to significantly reduce the national toll.

Royal Life Saving continues to educate Australians about how to modify their high-risk behaviour and assume greater responsibility for themselves and others while in or around the water. It is tragic, for example, that so many Australian children drown each year in backyard swimming pools and baths, and that older Australians are still none the wiser by either not wearing a life-jacket when aboard watercraft or by combining alcohol with aquatic participation. It is estimated that one fifth of all adults who drown had been drinking at the time or just prior to drowning.



WHO DROWNS IN AUSTRALIA?

Preventable Water Related Deaths by Age Group 1996-2000 2001/02

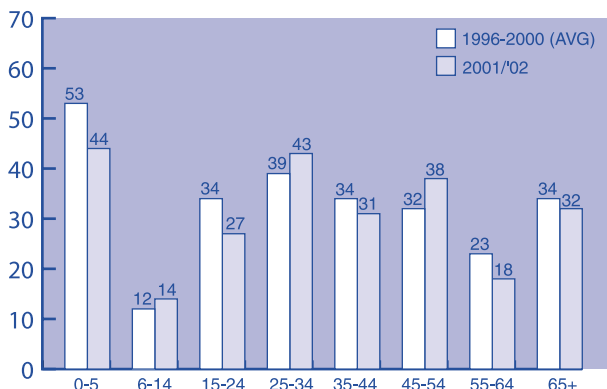


Figure 5

THE NATIONAL FORECAST

State Figures with Gender Breakdown

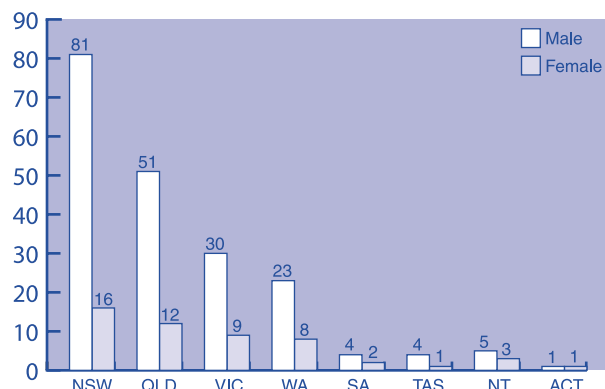


Figure 6

ACTIVITY

Drowning resulting from swimming, falling into water and bathing activities are all down compared to the five year average. Drowning when undertaking watercraft, fishing and diving activities were all up compared to the five year average (see figure 7). Recreational boaters need to ensure that their craft is seaworthy, weather conditions are safe and that they have sufficient personal floatation devices (PFD's) for all those on board.

Drowning following a fall into the water was significantly down compared to the five year average. Falls are usually associated with children falling into swimming pools, lakes, river and dams (see figure 7).

Fishing and diving accidents were up compared to the five year average. Fishing accidents often involve individuals not taking appropriate precautions when fishing from rock ledges.

DROWNING BY ACTIVITY

Water Related Deaths by Activity 1996-2000 and 2001/02

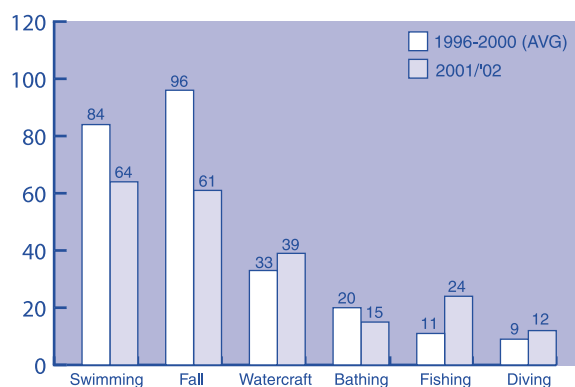


Figure 7

WATER SAFETY EDUCATION ONLINE

The RLSSA is urging parents to take a greater role in water safety education of their children. www.wetnwise.com and www.swimandsurvive.com, are two ways that parents can get involved. Why not visit these sites with your children and learn a little about water safety together.

Australians have a close affinity with water. Whether on our world famous beaches, in our abundant lakes and rivers, at the thousands of public swimming pools, or in our own backyards, water is a fundamental part of Australian life. It has become central to our well-being, health and lifestyle.

Unfortunately for around 300 people each year it also leads, unnecessarily, to their death. And most tragically, children under five years of age make up the largest number.

With this in mind, we have written this brief booklet to help you to make your experiences happy, fun and, most importantly, safe.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Royal Life Saving (RLSSA) acknowledges the following organisations for their assistance:

The Australian Bureau of Statistics, National and State Injury Surveillance Units, the National Coronial Information System and other sources.

The RLSSA is in the business of lifesaving and is a National volunteer-based organisation that continually strives to prevent aquatic related injury and death through its training programs, public education, research, consulting and international liaisons.

For more information contact:
RLSSA National Branch on 02 9181 5444



www.rlssa.org.au



Royal Life Saving

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ACT
02 6260 5800

SA
08 8234 9244

NSW
02 9879 4699

TAS
03 6243 7558

NT
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