

THE NATIONAL DROWNING REPORT 2003



250 PEOPLE DROWNED LAST YEAR!

Welcome to the 2003 National Drowning Report compiled by the Royal Life Saving Society Australia. This report describes all drowning related deaths in Australia between 1 July 2002 and 30 June 2003. Information for the report is collected either directly from Coroner offices, through the National Coroners Information System, or via media reports identified by Media Monitors throughout the year. All care is taken to ensure that the results are as accurate as possible as of 12 September 2003, however the numbers may change based on ongoing coronial investigations. It should be noted that these figures do not include other non drowning aquatic related deaths.

HOW MANY PEOPLE DROWNED IN 2002/03?

250 people drowned in Australia in the financial year 2002/03. The good news is that less people are drowning than five years ago. The drowning rate and numbers of people drowning are both down on the five year average, the latter decreasing by 15%. The drowning rate per 100,000 people decreased from the five year average of 1.57 to 1.27, a decrease of 19% (see figure 1).

THE ZERO DROWNING CHALLENGE

The RLSSA believes that all drowning deaths are preventable. By building a community that embraces a few simple water safety rules, possesses knowledge and skills that emphasise safe aquatic recreation, and is constantly alert when in, on or around water most water related deaths can be avoided. With another summer of outdoor activities planned and with unusually hot and dry weather forecast Australians will need to be particularly vigilant.

AUSTRALIAN DROWNINGS ON THE DECREASE

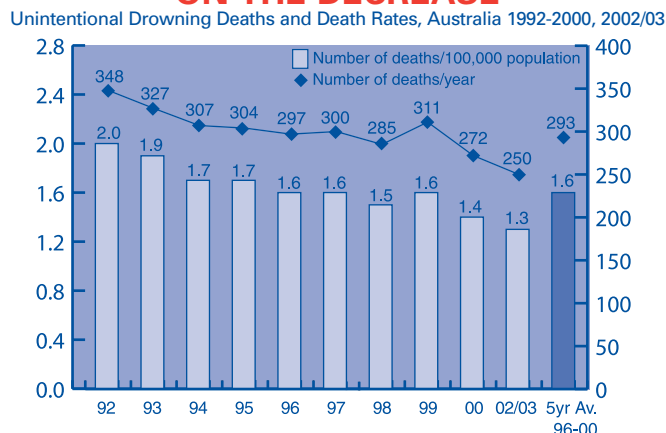


Figure 1

WHERE ARE PEOPLE DROWNING?

Drowning in rivers/oceans/harbours and beach environments is up on the five year average (see figure 2). The activities people were undertaking before drowning in river/ocean/harbour locations were generally fishing, walking or playing near the water, boating, diving and swimming.

The number of deaths in the category lake/dam/lagoon is down on the five year average. This may reflect the reduction in available water in rural Australia due to drought, however drowning in rural waterways continue to be concerning. The flat, calm appearance of lakes and rivers often gives a false impression of tranquillity and safety. When swimming in these locations always swim with a friend and check for hidden hazards and the depth of the water before entering. Remember water and alcohol don't mix, if you should not be driving a car you should not be on or in the water.

Drowning deaths in beach environments is up on the five year average. The main activities that people were undertaking prior to drowning were swimming, fishing, and walking or playing nearby. There was also a small number of diving deaths and instances where people were attempting to rescue someone else. When swimming at a beach always swim between the red and yellow flags, undertake all water related activities with a friend, and if fishing be sure that you use appropriate safety gear.

There were also a high proportion of swimming pool drowning incidents with 38 deaths recorded in the 2002/03 financial year. Of all people drowning in swimming pools in 2002/03 financial year 45% were aged 0-5 years. Often children in this age group are left unsupervised or the child quickly and quietly finds their way into the pool and drowns. Remember to directly supervise your child at all times around water. Supervision means to be within arms reach.

RIVERS, OCEANS AND HARBOURS DOMINATE DROWNING DEATHS

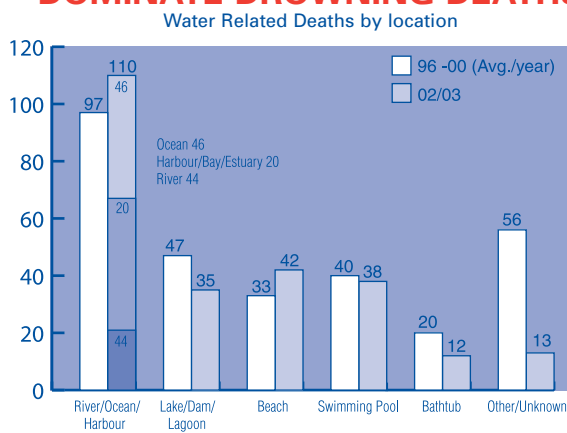


Figure 2

METHODS

Information for the drowning report is collected by Royal Life Saving Society Branches and analysed by the National Office. Information is collected from State and Territory Coroner Offices, and the National Coroners Information System (NCIS). Those using the NCIS apply four searches based on:

1. Mechanism – Threats to Breathing – Drowning and Immersion
2. Key Word “drown” searched for in Findings
3. Key Word “drown” searched for in Police Reports
4. Key Word “drown” searched for in Autopsy reports

Although all care is taken to ensure that the information is as accurate as possible, these figures are considered interim until the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures are released. These figures may change depending upon ongoing coronial investigations and findings. The report contains drowning deaths known at 12 September 2003, any cases identified after this date are not included. The drowning figures are also cross checked against media reported cases.

The five year average figures are based on information provided by the ABS and include “Accidental Drowning” and “Water Transport Drowning”. The RLSSA and ABS information does not include suicide, homicide, or natural death (such as heart attack) where known.

WHO DROWNS IN AUSTRALIA?

Preventable Water Related Deaths by Age Group, 1996-2000, 2002/03

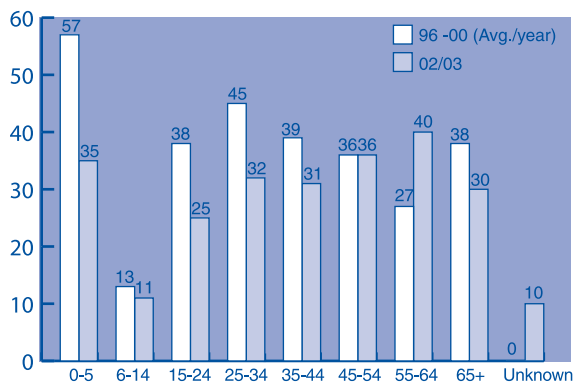


Figure 3

THE NATIONAL FORECAST

State Figures with Gender Breakdown, 2002/03

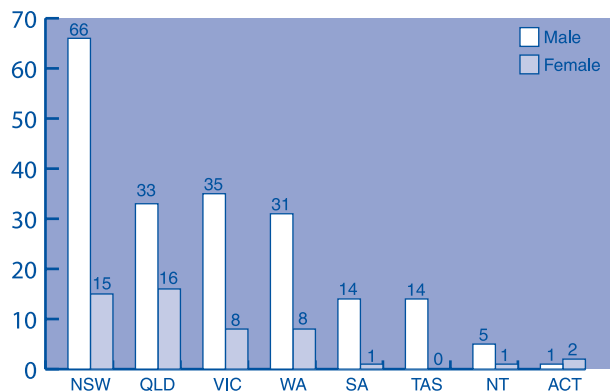


Figure 4

WHO DROWNS IN AUSTRALIA?

Males represented 80% of drowning victims, making men four times more likely to drown than women. This is consistent with the five year average (79%). All reported age groups are down compared to the five year average, except the 45-54 years age group which remains constant and 55-64 years age group which has increased (see figure 3).

The largest decrease was in the 0-5 years age group, which is down by 39% on the five year average. Significant improvement was also made in the 15-24, 25-34 and 35-44 year age groups, which are down by 34%, 29%, and 21% respectively. Of concern is the 48% increase in drowning in the 55-64 years age group compared to the five year average. As the number of people in this age category increases due to the ageing of the baby boomer generation, this category will continue to be a concern unless action is taken.

HOW MANY PEOPLE DROWNTED IN EACH STATE IN AUSTRALIA?

This is the ninth 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 aquatic recreation. It is alarming that the national trend remains high considering that most of these deaths are preventable (see figure 4).

WHAT ACTIVITIES WERE PEOPLE UNDERTAKING PRIOR TO DROWNING?

Of the seven activities identified, drowning deaths resulting from swimming, falling into water and bathing were down compared to the five year average. Drowning while undertaking watercraft, fishing and diving activities were all up compared to the five year average (see figure 5). Recreational boaters need to ensure that their craft is seaworthy, weather conditions are safe, that they have sufficient personal flotation devices (PFD's) for all those on board and carry a location device if going out on open water. They should also make sure somebody knows when they are to return so that authorities can be alerted if the vessel fails to arrive home.

KEEP WATCH AND

DROWNING BY ACTIVITY

Water Related Deaths by Activity, 1996-2000, 2002/03

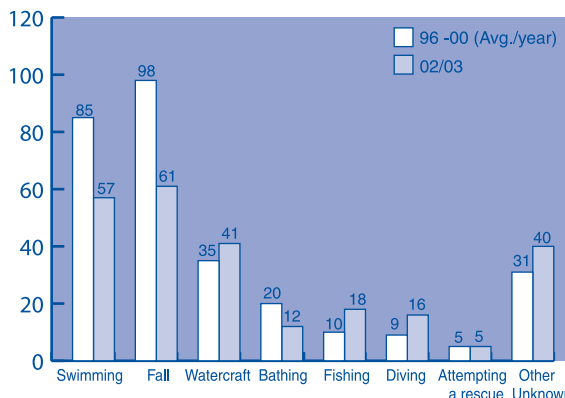


Figure 5

THE 0 - 5 YEAR AGE GROUP.

HOW MANY TODDLERS DROWNED?

35 children aged 0-5 years drowned in the financial year 2002/03 (see figure 6). The good news is this figure is down by 39% on the five year average (see figure 3). However, 35 preventable drowning deaths are far too many.

Whilst pleased with this reduction, drowning deaths on a year to year basis appear to be see-sawing. More work is needed to achieve a consistent year on year reduction in toddler drowning. The message from RLSSA is that children need to be constantly supervised and participate in water familiarisation activities, pool owners must fence their pools and parents should learn CPR. Remember "Keep Watch" at all times.

HOW DID THE TODDLERS ACCESS THE WATER?

Seventy one percent of toddler drowning deaths resulted from a fall or from the child wandering into the water (see figure 6). Of major concern is the fact that some toddlers were bathing or swimming at the time of the incident. All children under the age of 5 years should be actively supervised (i.e. within arms reach) at all times when in, on or near water.

WHAT PROPORTION OF TODDLERS MAKES UP THE TOTAL DROWNING FIGURE?

Over the period 1996-2000, the 0-5 years age group represented 19% of the total drowning figure. However in 2002/03 financial year this has decreased to 14% (see figure 3). The 0-5 years age group drowning figures continue to be high, and although there has been a decrease there is still a long way to go before the job is complete. The "Keep Watch" message continues to be paramount whenever children are in, on or around water environments.

IS THERE ANY FURTHER INFORMATION?

Yes, Williamson et al (2002) reported on NSW drowning deaths of children aged five years and under. This report examined drowning deaths in swimming pools, bathtubs and natural bodies of water and identified typical scenarios based on contributing and other pre-existing factors. In all scenarios, lack of direct adult supervision was identified as a contributing factor. Other factors included:

- An unfenced swimming pool or the fence no longer able to keep children out.
- The gate is left open allowing access to the swimming pool.
- Child not wearing safety equipment in swimming pool.
- Child left unattended in the bath.
- Water left in bath and child climbs in.

These findings reinforce the RLSSA "Keep Watch" message of supervision, water familiarisation, pool fencing, including self closing and self latching gates and the importance of parents learning CPR.



KEEP THEM ALIVE!

TODDLER DROWNING DEATHS

0-5 Age Group Water Related Deaths 1995/96, 2002/03

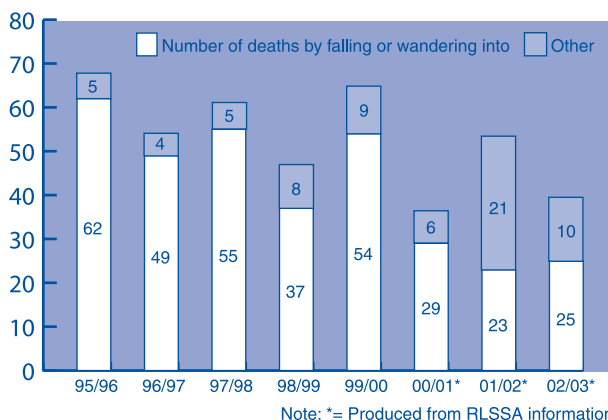


Figure 6

WHERE DO TODDLERS DROWN?

0-5 Years Age Group Water Related Deaths by Location 1996-2000, 2002/03

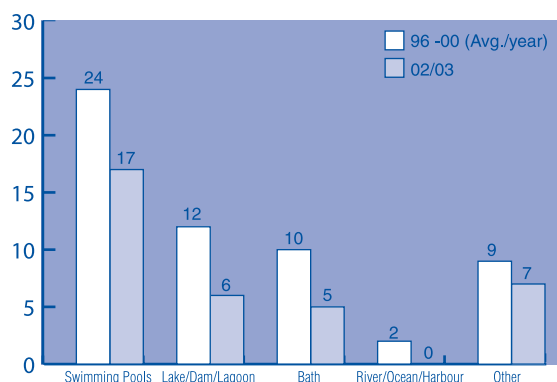


Figure 7

WHERE CAN I GO TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT PREVENTING TODDLERS FROM DROWNING?

The Keep Watch website (www.keepwatch.com.au) provides information for both parents and community health workers.



ALCOHOL AND WATER SAFETY

The figures produced in this report do not include information on alcohol and drowning deaths. However, a recent report produced by Driscoll et al (2003) found that alcohol appeared to contribute to 21% of drowning deaths in the 2000/01 financial year. There is no reason to think that this ratio has changed and it is therefore estimated that alcohol was a factor in 52 cases of drowning in the 2002/03 financial year. RLSSA believes that alcohol and water do not mix, if you are unable to drive a car you should not be in, on or near the water.

WHERE CAN I GO TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT PREVENTING DROWNING DEATHS AND WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE?

The RLSSA website (www.royallifesaving.com.au) provides water safety news and information, details of RLSSA programs and course details.

ARE YOU INTERESTED IN KNOWING ABOUT GLOBAL DROWNING DEATHS?

The World Health Organisation has recently released "Facts about Injuries: Drowning" which examines drowning deaths around the world. The fact sheet can be found at www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/index.html. The WHO found that there are an estimated 409,272 deaths due to drowning in the world annually, making it the second leading cause of unintentional injury death globally after road traffic injuries. The fact sheet identifies the magnitude of the problem by WHO region, risk factors, prevention and the role of public health.

¹ Williamson A, Irvine P, Sadural S (2002). Analysis of drownings involving children aged five years and under in NSW. NSW Water Safety Taskforce. Sydney

² Driscoll T, Steenkamp M, Harrison J (2003). Alcohol and Water Safety. National Alcohol Strategy 2001 to 2003-04. Commonwealth of Australia. Canberra

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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- The Australian Bureau of Statistics,
- National and State Injury Surveillance Units,
- The National Coronial Information System,
- State Coroners,
- Media Monitors

The RLSSA is a National volunteer-based organisation that is dedicated to lifesaving and continually strives to prevent aquatic related injury and death through its training programs, public education, research, aquatic risk management services and international liaisons.

For more information contact:

RLSSA National Branch on 02 8217 3111 or
RLSSA Website www.royallifesaving.com.au



www.royallifesaving.com.au



Royal Life Saving

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