

# 32

EVERYONE CAN BE A LIFESAVER



## Royal Life Saving

ROYAL LIFE SAVING SOCIETY - AUSTRALIA

FACT SHEET No. 32

# Drugs and Water Safety

### Q. Is the combination of drugs and aquatic activity an issue?

**A.** Drugs are present, on average, in 22% of drowning deaths each year. Of those, 64% are legal drugs such as medication, and include analgesics, antidepressants and medication to manage epilepsy. Approximately 27% of drugs involved in drownings deaths are illicit substances, such as cannabis and methamphetamine (commonly known as ice). In some cases, drowning deaths involved both legal and illegal drugs.

### Q. What are the risks of consuming drugs prior to participating in aquatic activity?

**A.** It is important to check the correct dose of any medicine you are taking and only take prescription medication as directed by your doctor. Some medications may cause drowsiness or affect alertness and reaction time. It is not recommended to participate in aquatic activities such as swimming or boating alone. Some medication may also have adverse effects when taken with alcohol, causing impaired judgement, and affecting coordination. Consuming illicit substances can have a similar influence on the body to alcohol, including numbing of senses, reducing inhibitions and distorting perception of risk. They can also reduce the likelihood of successful first aid and resuscitation in the case of an emergency.

### Q: If a person takes medication regularly to manage a medical condition, is it safe to participate in aquatic activity?

**A.** It is important to always take prescription medication as directed. If you have a specific medical condition, check with your doctor regarding any modifications needed to safely participate in aquatic activity. It is a good idea to go with someone else when participating in aquatic activity, or at least tell someone where you will be going and when you are expected back so they can respond if something goes wrong. In the case of epilepsy, supervision is recommended whenever in or around the water, especially for children.

### Q: What are the most common activities and locations related to drowning under the influence of drugs (medication and illicit substances)?

**A.** Drowning deaths involving drugs are most common in bathtubs and swimming pools but also occur in inland waterways, or when at the beach. Some of these locations can be in isolated and remote areas, where it may be harder to raise the alarm and for emergency services to respond. Drowning deaths involving drugs most frequently occurred when bathing, however drowning can happen when undertaking almost any type of aquatic activity including jumping into water, when fishing, using watercraft (such as kayaking, canoeing and surfing) and swimming. In a third of drug related drowning deaths the activity was unknown, suggesting that the person was alone when they got into difficulty, emphasising the importance of going with someone else.

## Real Life Story

Four men were camping at a remote riverside location. They were drinking and smoking all day. Two men decided to go kayaking at night. The kayak rolled over tipping them into the water. One man swam to shore to alert the others. Due to the combination of drugs, alcohol intoxication, darkness, and the isolation of their location they could not properly search for their friend or inform emergency services immediately. The man was found in the river the next morning, deceased. It was determined that an excess amount drugs and alcohol contributed to the circumstances that led to his drowning.



## Drugs and Water Safety Checklist:

- Avoid mixing (any) drugs with alcohol, particularly any medicine that can cause drowsiness
- Only take medication as prescribed by your doctor
- Avoid undertaking aquatic activity alone or at night if under the influence of illicit drugs or medication
- Be aware of any medication you are taking and its effect on your ability to actively supervise children around water
- Be aware that consuming drugs and some medications can impact alertness, judgement, coordination and reaction time
- If taking regular medication, check with your doctor about any impact on aquatic activity and ways to participate safely

### FOR MORE INFORMATION CHECK THE FOLLOWING FACTSHEETS:

Fact sheet 22: Alcohol & Water Safety  
Fact sheet 29: Drowning & Epilepsy

[royallifesaving.com.au/facts-and-figures/key-facts](http://royallifesaving.com.au/facts-and-figures/key-facts)

Proudly Supported by



**Australian Government**