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ROYAL LIFE SAVING
AUSTRALIA

FACT SHEET No. 33

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Drowning

Q. Is it safe for people with autism to go in the water?

A. Yes, water can be therapeutic for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). People with ASD can also learn to swim, when the right support and environment is provided. Strategies include small group or one-on-one lessons with a specialised instructor. People with ASD are often drawn to water, therefore supervision around water is paramount, including when bathing. Research shows that there is an increased risk of drowning for people with ASD compared to the general population.

Q. How many drowning deaths have been recorded in Australia of people with ASD?

A. For the 16 years between 2002 and 2018, 33 people drowned where ASD was known to be a factor, accounting for 0.7% of the total drowning deaths during this time. Most were male (82%) and children aged 0 – 9 years accounted for 70% of ASD-related drowning deaths. Over half (52%) recorded having other pre-existing medical conditions. Of those with ASD, children under five (0-4 years of age) are at the highest risk of drowning compared to any other age group.

Q. What is the most common location for people with ASD to drown in Australia?

A. For young children (0-4 years), the home environment is the most common place for drowning. Over the 16 year period, 30% of ASD-related drowning deaths occurred in a home swimming pool and a further 12% drowned in the bath. Over half (52%) of all ASD-related drowning deaths occurred at an inland waterway (river/creek/stream and lake/dam/lagoon). Most (52%) drowning deaths occurred as a result of unintentionally falling into water, usually as a result of gaining unsupervised access, e.g. a faulty gate, unfenced water body or a lapse in supervision. Wandering is a prevalent cause of drowning among people with ASD, and many gravitate towards water, therefore constant supervision of people with ASD is essential.

Q. What precautions need to be taken for people with autism when in the water?

A. Many individuals with ASD have difficulties perceiving risk and danger, particularly in unfamiliar settings. Although people with ASD may have had swimming lessons, they may experience difficulties generalising these skills across different environments. Close supervision, and water safety education, including exposure to different aquatic environments, is essential for preventing drowning among people with ASD. Swimming lessons with a specialised instructor should be a priority. Active supervision around the water, especially of children, and having a designated adult to keep watch at all times when in and around water is critical. Restricting access to water and installing barriers, such as pool fencing and gates, are effective measures to prevent drowning. It is recommended that parents and caregivers learn and maintain CPR and first aid skills.

ROYAL LIFE SAVING HAS DEVELOPED
A NUMBER OF FACT SHEETS ON
WATER SAFETY ISSUES IN AUSTRALIA.

Call Royal Life Saving on: **1300 737 763**

Or download them from:
www.keepwatch.com.au

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Checklist:

Royal Life Saving recommends the following strategies to keep people with ASD safe around water.

- 1. Actively supervise people around water at all times:**
This means focusing your attention on the person all of the time, whenever in, on or around water. People with ASD are known to wander and gravitate towards water. Being within arm's reach in the water, and maintaining close, constant visual contact at all times is recommended.
- 2. Restrict access to water:**
This includes fencing pools/spas with a self-closing and self-latching gate (and ensuring these are maintained), closing bathroom doors after use, covering pools/spas, and tanks, placing mesh on water features and fish ponds, and securely fastening lids on nappy buckets. Remove toys from water when not in use. Inflatable pools with a depth greater than 300mm need to be fenced by law. Check with your local council for specific pool fencing regulations.
- 3. Water awareness:**
This includes water familiarisation, checking for and removing water hazards, setting rules around water and discussing water safety. People with ASD may require one-on-one lessons with a specialised instructor trained to teach people with ASD. Contact Autism Swim for more information.
- 4. Resuscitate:** Learn resuscitation/CPR, first aid skills and know how to save a life. It is important to maintain these life saving skills. Contact your nearest Royal Life Saving office for course details.

RLSSA would like to acknowledge Autism Swim for their input into this fact sheet. www.autismswim.com.au