

# Rip Currents

"I grew up swimming in the ocean and am very comfortable in it. One of my favorite pastimes in the ocean is diving under breakers and floating over swells. [Once], I dove under a wave... but when I surfaced and looked back over my shoulder, I was way out from the shore. I knew immediately what had happened. I tried swimming parallel to the shore, but was still in a very strong current and began to tire quickly.

Then a wave broke over my head, and I felt the panic rising. I know that panic is one's worst enemy in the water, so I floated and treaded water for a few minutes to catch my breath and relax. ...When I looked out to sea to keep an eye on the swells,...I realized that just a little further out, there were surfers.

[So] instead of trying to make it back to shore on my own, I turned and swam out to where they were. I told them what had happened and asked if one of them would allow me to accompany him into shore using his board as a boogie board for both of us. Of course, one of them agreed.

It took both of us to get far enough away from the current so we could paddle back into shore. I feel very fortunate that I recognized what had happened, knew not to panic, and was able to find a solution."

by Kathryn T. Graham

from the National Weather Service Rip Current Safety Web page  
[http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov/real\\_life.shtml](http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov/real_life.shtml)

## What You Will Do

Demonstrate why swimmers caught in rip currents have to swim parallel to the shore to escape

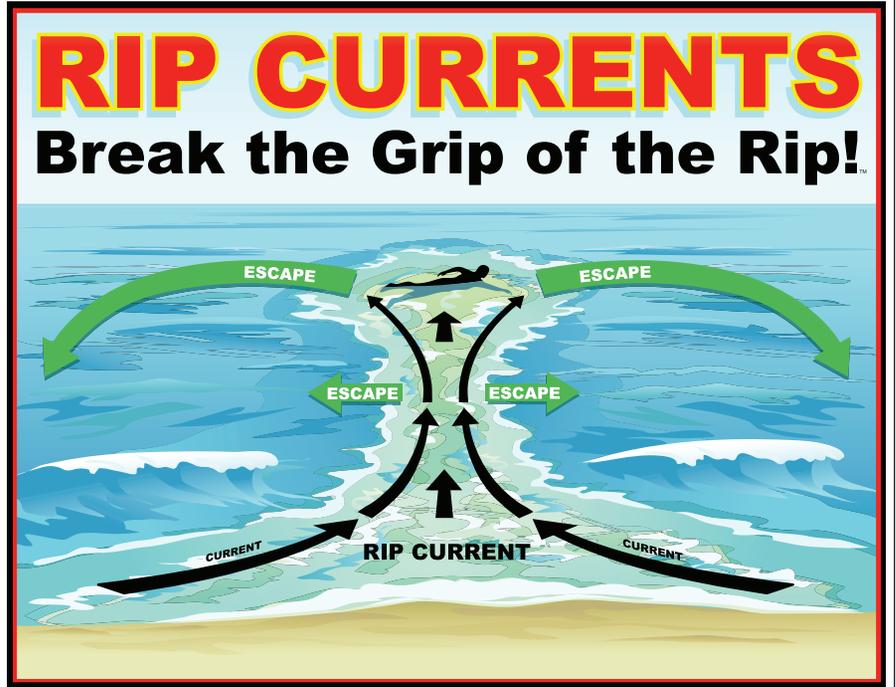
Rip currents are powerful, channeled currents of water flowing away from shore. They can occur at any beach with breaking waves, including many Great Lakes. These currents are killers. The United States Lifesaving Association estimates that every year, rip currents on our nation's beaches kill more than 100 people.

Here are some clues that a rip current may be present:

- A channel of churning, choppy water
- A difference in water color
- A line of foam, seaweed or debris moving out to sea
- A break in the incoming wave pattern

Remember the three basic safety rules for ocean swimming:

- Know how to swim
- Never swim alone
- If in doubt, don't go out



from a Rip Current Safety Poster by NOAA's National Weather Service, NOAA's National Sea Grant College Program, and the United States Lifesaving Association  
([http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov/signs/rip\\_signs-r.pdf](http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov/signs/rip_signs-r.pdf))

If you are ever caught in a rip current:

- Don't fight the current
- Stay calm
- Swim parallel to the shore to escape the current, then swim toward the beach
- If you can't escape, float or tread water
- If you need help, call or wave your arms for assistance

## What You Will Need

- ❑ Two or more strips of ribbon, rope or string, each at least ten feet long; if you have a choice, a blue color is good for representing ocean waves
- ❑ At least five people, including yourself

## How to Do It

1. Have pairs of participants hold opposite ends of the rope or ribbon. You will need at least two pairs of participants to do the demonstration.
2. Designate one side of a room or outdoor space as the “shore” and the opposite side as “deep water.”
3. Have pairs of participants stand so that the rope or ribbon is stretched out, and is parallel to the shore. These participants and their ropes or ribbons represent waves.
4. Place a “trapped swimmer” participant between two of the “waves.”
5. Have the “waves” walk toward the “deeper water,” staying parallel to shore as they move. The movement of the “waves” represents the flow of a rip current. The “trapped swimmer” can only escape being carried into “deeper water” by swimming parallel to the waves until she or he is out of the rip current.



Rip Current on Grand Avenue Beach  
Courtesy of Chris Brewster, USLA



Beach View of Rip Current Along Jetty  
Courtesy of Dr. Tom Herrington, Stevens Institute of Technology



## Want to Do More?

NOAA sponsors the “Break The Grip Of The Rip®” Public Awareness Campaign, and has designated the first full week of June every year as Rip Current Awareness Week. Find out more about rip currents on NOAA’s rip current Web site at [www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov](http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov), which includes a rip current brochure, rip current beach signs, photographs, and links to other resources.

In coastal areas, many of NOAA’s National Weather Service Forecast Offices issue a Rip Current Outlook as a part of their Surf Zone Forecast. NOAA identifies days with forecasts for particularly dangerous rip currents with “High Risk of rip currents.”

Visit: <http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov/forecasts.shtml> to learn more.

Close up of Rip Current  
Courtesy of Lifeguard Captain Nick Steers,  
County of Los Angeles Fire Department