

Safety Site

Signs of Drowning

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Recreational Safety takes Responsibility & Control

The symptoms of drowning can vary. A drowning victim may show no symptoms.

Victims may not be able to call for help because they are expending all of their energy trying to breathe or keep their head above water. When water is inhaled, the upper airway or larynx may go into a spasm, making it difficult to cry for help.

In real life, drowning doesn't look at all like it is depicted on television or in the movies. The victim does not flail and thrash in the water. It is the rare person who is found thrashing in water. Instead, drowning tends to be a deceptive quieter act, and victims tend to appear lethargic or are found unresponsive floating on the water, or submerged beneath it. For those who are alive, they may be anxious, confused, and short of breath. Again, it is the function of the brain and lungs that are the main concerns in drowning victims.

The drowning victim often is bobbing with their head tilted back just at the waterline and the mouth wide open. There are attempts to keep rolling on to the back. The respiratory effort may be rapid but is often shallow. The eyes tend to be wide open and may hold a sense of panic. If there is a swimming effort, it is weak and uncoordinated.

1. The victim can not call for help. (If you can not breathe, you can not speak.)
2. The victim can not wave for help.
3. The victim remains upright in the water. (There are no signs of kicking, may struggle for 20-60 seconds before going under.)
4. Eyes are glassy.
5. The face may be hard to see. (Hair may be over the forehead and eyes.)
6. The head is low in the water.
7. The victim is quiet. (Most children playing in the water make noise.)

8. The victim may not display any distress. (Ask if they are all right. If they are unresponsive, get them out of the water immediately.)

All drowning victims require an emergency 911 call.

Even though the majority of drowning victims are revived with first aid, all these victims require activation of the emergency medical services and evaluation by a health care professional. Complications of the drowning event may take time to develop; it may be hours before signs and symptoms to develop.

Some of the information above was courtesy of the American Red Cross.