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American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council Instructor Advisory: Swimming After Eating

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American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council

Instructor Advisory: Swimming After Eating

**Peter Chambers, Linda Quan, Peter G. Wernicki,
and David Markenson**

Scientific Issue/Question/Topic:

Does eating right before swimming have health risks or increase the risk of drowning?

Specific Review Question Addressed

Does swimming within one hour after eating increase the risk of drowning in child or adult recreational or competitive swimmers?

Overview

There is a persistent belief in the United States that swimming within one hour after eating will cause stomach cramps, which could lead to drowning. This review will try to show that there is no correlation between eating and drowning or near-drowning events and demonstrate that it is safe to swim after eating.

Review Process

A literature search was conducted in the following databases: PubMed, Ovid Medline and OldMedline, CINAHL, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, UpToDate, MDConsult, JSTOR, Academic Search Complete, Google Scholar, Google Books, Google Web Search, ERIC, SPORTDiscus, and Physical Education Index. Search strings and terms used included: Swim, swimming, swam, drown, drowning, drowned, eat, eating, ate. Search results were limited to English language articles related to humans and published after 1960. No restrictions on type of article were used.

Scientific Foundation

There is little recently published scientific literature or even general information on the effects of eating before swimming. Several studies conducted in the 1960s showed no effect on swimming performance and very minimal side effects. In these studies, competitive swimmers swam different distances at several different time intervals after both large and small meals. There was no incidence of fatal or non-fatal drowning. No reported cases of eating before swimming causing or contributing to fatal or non-fatal drowning are reported in any of the literature searched. No major medical or safety organizations make any current recommendations to wait before swimming after eating. Currently available information

suggests that eating before swimming is not a contributing risk for drowning and can be dismissed as a myth.

Summary

There is currently no evidence to support any link between eating before swimming and drowning. The persistence of this myth is not actively harmful, but it is nonetheless a myth. There is unlikely to be further research in this area, and previous studies were fairly conclusive and there is currently no active debate in the literature.

Recommendations

Standard: None

Guideline: None

Option: Food intake restrictions prior to swimming are unnecessary. (Class III Level of Evidence)