

Water safety FAQs

Why haven't you done anything about water safety before?

We push out our water safety messages throughout the year, particularly in the summer when it's very hot and in the winter when there is more risk of slipping on ice.

Our Education volunteers, the Explorers, work with primary school children all through the school year to teach them about the canals and water safety.

I can swim, why shouldn't I get in the water?

Even the strongest swimmers may face difficulties in the water. The water will be cold, even in the summer; which will take your breath away and leave you gasping for air. The shock of the cold water will also mean that your blood will rush away from your muscles to protect your vital organs, leaving your muscle and limbs without energy to keep you afloat.

There may be unseen objects which could cause you injury. Open water is often murky so you won't be able to tell the depth. It could be much deeper than you expect or much shallower than you expect, making it very dangerous if you jump in.

I get in the swimming pool and I'm fine with it, what's different about open water swimming?

In a swimming pool, there are no obstacles in the water and life guards are on hand all the time. Typical swimming pool temperatures are 25 – 28 degrees centigrade and you can easily get out using the access ladders.

Open water – the sea, canals, rivers, reservoirs, docks - is very different. The average outdoor water temperature in the UK is 11 degrees centigrade. There are no life guards on the waterways and many stretches of the coast to rescue you if you get into difficulties. There are no ladders to get out. If you fall in the water, it is likely you will be wearing clothes which will become heavy when wet making it much harder to stay afloat or lift yourself out of the water. In 2014, 186 people drowned in inland waters and 102 in coastal waters. You won't be able to see any obstacles in the water which could cause you injury.

My friends all swim in the water and it's really fun. I don't want to miss out. Why shouldn't I get in the water?

Even if your friends think it's a good idea to get in the water, please don't do the same. There are too many unseen dangers and it's just too risky.

Find other ways to cool down and to have fun – find your nearest swimming pool, eat an ice cream, go to the park, go to the cinema. Don't get in the water.

Watch this video about James Goodship to see why you shouldn't mess about in the water with your friends [insert link]

Why don't you put life rings by the water?

The Trust places a variety of Public Rescue Equipment (PRE) in key locations, such as docks, big locks and urban environments, but due to the sheer length of the waterways in our care, it is just not possible to put life rings everywhere. Sadly equipment such as life rings which are available are often vandalised or stolen.

If you see that a life ring is missing from its usual spot, please let the Trust know so that we can arrange for a replacement as quickly as possible.

We are working with some local water safety partnerships and local Councils, and are in discussions with other partnerships and Councils across England and Wales, to install PRE which can be monitored 24/7.

What do I do if my dog gets into the water?

If your dog gets into the water, don't jump in after it. Although it will be distressing to see your pet in the water if he/she starts to have difficulties, do not put yourself in danger to rescue them. Encourage your dog to swim over to you. If they are unable to do this, try to reach him/her with a long branch.

Please try to keep your dog on a short lead when walking along the towpaths so they don't run off and risk jumping into the water. This will also help other towpath visitors who might be scared of dogs or risk being tripped up if unsteady on their feet.

If you want people to stop getting in the water, why don't you fence off the canals?

The Trust cares for 2,000 miles of canals, rivers, reservoirs and docks in England and Wales. Not only is it not feasible to fence off the whole 2,000 miles, there are also many other things to consider. In 2015, canals and rivers were used by 34,000 boats which need to moor up along the towpath and thousands of anglers who need clear and direct access to the water; in order for us to care for the canal network we need direct access to the water, locks, and other water structures.

The canals aren't just for water craft and are enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of people every month – 385 million visits were made during 2015 alone. Putting up fencing would limit the already small amount of space available on the narrow towpaths, creating possible risks for cyclist, walkers, runners and other visitors. Wildlife is thriving on our towpaths and we work hard to create healthy and sustainable habitats for many species and fencing could potentially harm animals moving from the hedgerows to the water, as well as damaging important water habitats.

The canal network is over 200 years old and there are many stretches of water and structures along it which are heritage listed, meaning it wouldn't be possible to interfere with the design of the towpath or canal bank.

What do I do if I see someone struggling in the water?

Do not get into the water, you may get into difficulties as well. Call the emergency services as soon as you can. Keep an eye on the person, keep talking to them, and stay near them.

If you are able to, get something to help them, like a throw line if available or a tree branch to reach out to them. Do not put yourself into the same position to help someone in difficulties.

If I can't get in the water and I think I can help, am I just supposed to leave them to drown?

We advise not to get into the water as you may get into difficulties yourself. You may feel that you are able to help them but please do not get into the water.

- The shock of the water can take your breath away and cause your muscles to cramp, making it very difficult for you to stay above the surface;
- There may be objects hidden under the water which could cause you harm;
- The water may be deeper than you can see from the towpath. Canals don't normally have sloping sides and there are only ladders at locks so it isn't easy to get out of a canal wearing wet clothes and assisting someone else;
- The weight of the person you want to assist will make staying above the surface much harder, particularly if you are not able to get out straight away;
- Boaters might not be able to see you in or under the water and won't know to stop causing serious harm to you and the other person.

I live on a boat and can't avoid the water, how do I stay safe?

The Trust advises boaters of the following, which you can find in your **Boater's Handbook**. Please read the full Boating Safety section of your handbook thoroughly:

- Children, non-swimmers, those with disabilities and lone boaters should wear lifejackets whenever they're on deck. And that applies to everyone if you're negotiating tidal waters, strong streams or currents or if the decks are slippery and whenever the water is likely to be cold.
- It's always safer to wear a lifejacket or buoyancy garment. You could be knocked unconscious. Rivers and deep canals can give disabling cold shock even in summer. It is difficult to swim when fully clothed.
- Wear non-slip shoes
- Don't try to jump from the boat onto the bank
- Keep off the roof when underway (low bridges could knock you for six or worse)
- Don't all stand together on the same side if it risks tipping the boat over

Do you have any resources for teaching children about water safety?

The Canal & River Trust Education volunteers are called Explorers and they visit primary schools during term time year round to teach children about the canals. Visits are all linked to the national curriculum and every visit addresses water safety.

Between January – March 2016 alone, the Explorer volunteers reached 10,000 primary school children through assemblies and school visits.

For more information visit - <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/explorers/waterside-safety-challenge>

What should I do if I see children playing in the water?

Check if the children are with their parents or adults. If they are, approach the parents/adults and respectfully tell them of the risks of swimming in open water. Ultimately it is the parent/adults decision if they are happy for their child to be in the water.

Be mindful about approaching children who are on their own – make sure you don't put them or yourselves in a difficult situation.