

UC San Diego Health System Expert Gives Tips on Avoiding Wave of Surfing Injuries

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For many beach-goers summertime means shredding waves. It is estimated that more than 17 million Americans are active surfers, including one million in California alone. Even though the benefits for the body and mind are unquestionable, there are inherent health risks associated with the sport.



Kenneth Taylor, MD, practicing what he preaches.

“The most common acute injuries are sprains, strains, lacerations, dislocations and fractures, often caused by contact with the surfer’s own board,” said Kenneth Samuel Taylor, MD, professor of Family and Preventive Medicine at the UC San Diego School of Medicine. “However, this is not always the case. In fact, some injuries are challenging for doctors to diagnose if they occurred by water because there are typically no external wounds.”

Taylor is an international expert in the field and serves as Medical Director for the International Surfing Association where he is responsible for developing medical protocols and providing medical coverage at the World Surfing Games – the world’s largest surfing tournament.

“Several safety devices, such as helmets, protective eye-wear and rubber guards for the board's fins are available, but none have proven to completely prevent injuries,” said Taylor.

The use of a surfboard leash for protection is recommended but can occasionally backfire. Leashes keep the board near the surfer, providing a flotation device in case of an accident, as well as reducing the number of accidents caused by run-away boards hitting other surfers. Leashes, however, can make it more likely for a loose board to recoil back at the surfer and cause serious complications, such as eye damage.

“That is why it is important to always stay focused and protect your head with your arms every time when surfacing from a wipe-out,” said Taylor. “Of course surfers should also make sure that weather and water conditions are safe.” Several studies have shown that advanced surfers are prone to more severe injuries than less experienced ones because they often risk surfing larger waves in more extreme conditions.

Additional surfing hazards may come from the marine environment. “Although many people associate water sports with shark attacks, they are in fact, extremely rare,” said Taylor. Stingray injuries are much more common, and in most cases, can initially be treated with hot water to inactivate the nerve toxin. Taylor adds that shuffling your feet while walking through shallow water can prevent stings because bottom-dwelling fish scatter when they are alerted by human presence.

Surfers should also be aware of shallow corals reefs – another common danger. “Wounds sustained in contact with coral reefs usually heal slowly due to various toxins and microbes originating from the reefs. In many cases, thorough cleansing, antibiotics and tetanus immunization might be required,” said Taylor.

Furthermore, surfers are also at risk of chronic conditions resulting from long-term environmental exposure. These include serious illnesses, such as skin cancer and ear problems.

“Subjecting the ear to cold water and wind for extended periods of time stimulates the abnormal bone growth that can eventually block the ear canal reducing sound transmission to the eardrum, as well as trapping water deep in the canal, predisposing surfers to otitis externa – a condition known as surfer's ear,” said Taylor. “Drying ears out with a 50/50 white vinegar/rubbing alcohol solution aids in keeping ears healthy.”

Taylor also emphasizes the importance of applying sunscreen with UVA and UVB protection, wearing protective clothing and limiting sun exposure between 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m.

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