Incident Review #1
Two Scouts who were nonswimmers drowned in a river during a troop swim. The boys were observed earlier playing in shallow water, and then disappeared without shouting or appearing to struggle. The current in the river was very slight, but there was an unmarked drop-off into deep water.

Key Points
- Witnesses failed to quickly recognize the problem. Assuming that a victim will always call for help is a potentially fatal mistake. Those with no experience in deep water will start to drown immediately after losing contact with the bottom; they may be unable to call for help or even move a few feet to safety. In less than a minute they can lose consciousness, and unconscious victims are likely to submerge.
- Clearly marked boundaries and identified nonswimmer/shallow areas will allow them to enjoy the water.

Incident Review #2
An 18-year-old assistant Scoutmaster, who had recently tested as a beginner swimmer during summer camp, drowned while attempting to swim across a river with two younger Scouts on a unit outing.

Key Points
- The Scouter in this case could swim, but not well. Exhaustion, followed by drowning, is a common problem for those who attempt to swim distances beyond their capability.
- Swim tests to identify ability are important so as not to place participants into situations they may not be able to handle.
- Life jacket use may be effective in some circumstances such as deep, turbid, or flowing water in a river.

“Shallow areas should be identified for nonswimmers. Beginner swim area characteristics can include water over a person’s head in limited areas where there is shallow water nearby.”

Learning to swim and aquatics activities are core parts of the Scouting program. More than 1.25 million aquatics-related merit badges have been earned by Boy Scouts since 2009.

While rare, drowning incidents and aquatics injuries have occurred in Scouting, and there are lessons to be learned that can help save lives in the future.

Consider these incidents and some key points that relate to each one.
Incident Review #3
A 16-year-old crew member hiked ahead of the adults on an outing, arrived at a pool beneath a waterfall, and decided to swim there. The falls were hitting the water in a way that created an extremely strong current, pulling the boy under the surface, and he drowned. Witnesses estimate that he was under water for two to three minutes.

Key Points
- Safe Swim Defense points including qualified supervision, a rescue team, lookouts, and the buddy system all contribute to a successful swimming experience.
- Inspection of the swim area, identification of hazards, and establishing a rescue team prior to swimming are key to a successful outing.
- Water depth, quality, temperature, movement, and clarity are important considerations in defining a safe swim area.

Incident Review #4
A parent, age 49, suffered an epileptic seizure and drowned while on a tube in a river about 20 to 25 feet deep.

Key Points
- Poor health and/or lack of awareness of risk factors have led to disabling injuries, illnesses, and even fatalities. Because we care about our participants’ health and safety, the Boy Scouts of America has produced and required use of standardized annual health and medical information since at least the 1930s.
- If an individual has a significant health condition, an examination by a physician and consultation with the participant about extra precautions to take may be appropriate.
- The use of a life jacket in deep (more than 12 feet), turbid, or moving water is appropriate.

“Qualified supervision, personal health review, safe area, response personnel, lookout, ability groups, buddy system, and discipline make up the eight points of the BSA’s Safe Swim Defense.”
Discussion Questions

• What risks or hazards are common in swimming-related incidents?

• All of the incidents described occurred in rivers. Which risks are also present when swimming in pools? In both settings, how can risks be reduced?

• How do the eight points of the Safe Swim Defense help to prevent swimming-related incidents?

• What information in the Annual Health and Medical Record is relevant to these incidents?

• What supervision should unit leaders provide when conducting swimming programs?

• What key factors should be considered in planning swimming activities and establishing emergency response plans?

Resources

Safe Swim Defense training—DVD (AV-09DVD29) or online at MyScouting.org

Aquatics Supervision, No. 34346

Swimming and Lifesaving merit badge pamphlets

Awareness training for adults is provided by Safe Swim Defense (required). Skill training for adults and older youth is provided by Aquatics Supervision: Swimming & Water Rescue and by the BSA Lifeguard program.

Youth in Scouting are trained as they advance in rank, and through the Swimming and Lifesaving merit badges.