

Public Service Announcement: Hazards of Diving Into Shallow Water

Diving into water less than 10- to 12-feet deep can result in devastating and irreversible injuries to the spinal cord, warns Charles Kuntz IV, M.D., a neurosurgeon with the Mayfield Clinic and The Neuroscience Institute at the University of Cincinnati and University Hospital.

Spinal cord injury occurs when the spinal cord, a bundle of nerves that runs down the back from the base of the brain to the waist, is damaged or severed by trauma. This can occur during a dive into shallow water if the diver's head strikes the bottom, causing the vertebrae that encircle the spinal cord to collapse. If the spinal cord is damaged and it is unable to transmit nerve impulses to and from the brain, paralysis occurs.

"Witnessing a life-altering injury of this kind is probably the most tragic and preventable event I see," said Dr. Kuntz. "With one unfortunate decision, the life of a healthy young person is utterly transformed. The individual is likely to be dependent on machines for the rest of his or her life."

Dr. Kuntz urged parents, teachers, camp counselors, and coaches to impress upon young people the hazards of diving into shallow water. Dr. Kuntz believes that diving should be performed in water that is at least 10 to 12 feet deep. Swimmers and divers should enter the water feet first to determine depth.

According to the National Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, an estimated 11,000 spinal cord injuries occur in the United States each year. Males suffer 81.2 percent of these injuries, and diving is the fourth leading cause of spinal cord injury among males.

The ThinkFirst National Injury Prevention Foundation urges swimmers never to dive into an above-ground pool.

- For additional information about preventing traumatic brain and spinal injuries, visit the ThinkFirst National Injury Prevention Foundation at <http://www.thinkfirst.org/home.asp>.
- To view ThinkFirst's list of facts and safety tips relating to a variety of activities, from swimming to riding bicycles, go to: <http://www.thinkfirst.org/About/Facts.asp>.