

Dry Drowning

Drowning is the second most common cause of death in children in the United States.

A 10 year old boy named Johnny "Jon Jon" Jackson died June 1, 2008 in Goose Creek, South Carolina, subsequent to swimming in the pool at the apartment complex where he lived. Jon Jon was wearing floatation devices on his arms and was being monitored by his mother. His mother said that he inhaled some water while swimming and she described him as "taking a little bit of water in and coughing and then calming down." He afterwards appeared fine, but less than two hours after leaving the pool; he twice defecated in his pants and complained of being tired. After being bathed and dressing himself back at the apartment, he walked to his bed unaided, leaving his mother to believe that he was simply worn out. Yet when his mother checked on Johnny a few minutes later, she discovered that white foam was issuing from his mouth, his lips were blue, and his tongue was sticking out. The family called 911, but Johnny suffered cardiac arrest during transport to the hospital and was pronounced dead on arrival. According to the coroner, water was found in Johnny's lungs, and the cause of his death was listed as "asphyxiation by drowning."

While the article about Johnny's death is factual, it contains one key element of confusion: Jon Jon Jackson was not technically a "dry drowning" victim, but rather a victim of "delayed drowning."

The primary difference between dry drowning and secondary (or delayed) drowning is the presence or absence of water in the victim's lungs. In Jon Jon Jackson's case, he died with water in his lungs, so his death was more typical of "ordinary" drowning victims even though he lived for a couple of hours after leaving the pool. By contrast, true dry drowning deaths do not involve the presence of liquid in the lungs.

There are two primary theories as to what causes dry drowning. The first theory is that a sudden rush of water into the throat causes the airway to snap shut, a condition known as laryngospasm. During this event, although no water enters the lungs, no air enters either, so the victim dies of asphyxiation. The second explanation posits that the shock of a swimmer, suddenly entering extremely cold water causes the heart to stop. Dry drowning usually occurs between one and 24 hours after the incident. A person can have a drowning incident, be pulled out of the water, be okay, then sometime within the next 24 hours, they can drown.

To help prevent dry drowning, keep your mouth closed when jumping or diving into the water, thereby protecting the larynx from a sudden rush of water that could cause it to spasm and cut off the airway. Also, do not dive or jump into extremely cold water; instead, enter cold water gradually. Those who have a history of heart problems should avoid entering cold water at all, even if they plan to go slowly.

Caregivers should also guard against delayed drowning by monitoring very closely any child who has come out of the water coughing and sputtering (signs of water having been breathed in), especially keeping an eye out for any further difficulties in breathing, extreme tiredness, or marked changes in behavior.

One additional caution should be noted regarding drowning: it is a fallacy that those who lose their lives in such fashion will flail about wildly even as they are slipping beneath the water's surface. Drowning generally occurs silently and smoothly, the victim quietly passing away wholly unnoticed as friends or family chatter nearby. Therefore, never mistake a lack of commotion for a sign that everything is all right: instead, keep your eyes on those you are supposed to be watching rather than trust that they will do or shout something to alert you if anything goes awry.

Researched online. Data gathered through various sources.