

Happy & Healthy Pediatrics

Pediatric, Adolescent, & Breastfeeding Medicine



“DRY DROWNING”

We wanted to clarify about dry drowning since it is causing a lot of unnecessary stress for parents. “Dry drowning” is not even an accepted medical term. Your child is not going to go swimming, swallow some water, have no issues in the water whatsoever, and then suddenly die without warning that night or 4 days later. We know the stories you have been reading, because we see them on our Facebook feed too. And we know the thought of losing your child makes you feel viscerally sick to your stomach, because we feel that way too. That’s why we wanted to clarify the point!

Kids drown when they aspirate water in their lungs, not from swallowing water. Swallowed water goes through the esophagus, into the stomach, and then down the digestive tract. Aspiration is when the water goes into the trachea and down into the lungs. In this case, the patient will have an episode of distress after they come out (or are pulled out) of the water. As a parent, you will see it and know they are not ok. They will cough and gasp and have trouble breathing. If your child has an episode like this and then later continues coughing, vomiting, wheezing, chest or belly pain, or seems abnormally tired, then go to the emergency room immediately. In this type of drowning, and this is very rare-only 1-2 % of all U.S. drowning incidents, the victim will exhibit continuing symptoms for minutes or hours after the episode of distress in the water. If your child goes swimming and does not have an aspiration event and afterwards they are totally fine, then they are perfectly fine. No need to worry.

In the Texas case, CNN reported that the night after being knocked down over by a wave, the child vomited and had diarrhea for several days which the parents thought was a stomach bug. That child also had coughing and sputtering after being pulled out of the water.

The easiest thing we can do to prevent this is supervision in the water. Then kids are less likely to have an initial incident in the water, and if they do have one, parents are aware and can watch them closely. If kids exhibit symptoms, parents should take them to an emergency room immediately or call 911.