



Lifeguards

IN THE SURF

Your guide to
surfsport safety



THE RNLI IS THE CHARITY THAT SAVES LIVES AT SEA

IN THE SURF

INTRODUCTION

The UK has a beautiful coastline so it's no surprise that each year thousands of people are taking up exciting coastal watersports. These activities are great fun and form part of a healthy lifestyle but we urge you to think about your safety too.

Each year we respond to around 2,000 surfsport-related incidents. For this reason the RNLI recommends that prior to starting any watersport you should seek advice from an accredited training centre or recognised school.

Once you've received training in your chosen watersport and you want to practise, you should always choose a lifeguarded beach. To find your nearest lifeguarded beach go online and visit **goodbeachguide.co.uk**

The opening pages of this guide are packed full of useful tips to help you understand the beach environment and keep you safe in the surf. You will then find sports-specific safety tips and recommended equipment, as well as contact details from the most popular surfsports governing bodies.

Use this guide as a starting point to having a great time in the surf this Summer!

Enjoy!

RNLI Beach Safety Team

In this guide you will see two types of warning symbol:



This is a hazard to watch out for – take care!



This is a prohibition sign – don't do it!

UNDERSTANDING FLAGS

On arrival at a lifeguarded beach you'll need to know your flags:

RED AND YELLOW FLAGS

Lifeguarded area. Safest area to swim, bodyboard and use inflatables.

BLACK AND WHITE CHEQUERED FLAGS

For surfboards, stand-up paddleboards, kayaks, and other non-powered craft. Launch and recovery area for kitesurfers and windsurfers. Never swim or bodyboard here.

RED FLAG

Danger! Never go in the water under any circumstances when the red flag is flying.

ORANGE WINDSOCK

Indicates offshore or strong winds conditions. Never use inflatables when the windsock is flying.



When learning, do not kitesurf, windsurf or use stand-up paddleboards when the wind is blowing offshore.

UNDERSTANDING RIPS



RIPS ARE STRONG CURRENTS THAT CAN QUICKLY TAKE YOU FROM THE SHALLOWS OUT OF YOUR DEPTH

Lifeguards will show you how you can avoid rips but if you do get caught in one:

- stay calm – don't panic
- if you can stand, wade don't swim
- keep hold of your board or inflatable to help you float
- raise your hand and shout for help
- never try to swim directly against the rip or you'll get exhausted
- swim parallel to the beach until free of the rip, then make for shore
- if you see anyone else in trouble, alert the lifeguards or call 999 or 112 and ask for the Coastguard.

RIP CURRENT SHOWN WITH COLOURED DYE



Photo: SLISA



WHAT TO DO IF CAUGHT IN A RIP

WAVES



Waves are formed by the wind blowing across the surface of the sea. How steeply a beach shelves will also affect the size and type of wave.



Spilling waves are ideal for beginner board riders as they break consistently. Start off in the shallow white water before progressing to deeper water and unbroken waves.

Dumping waves or heavy shore break should be avoided. These waves break quickly with a lot of force making them dangerous for beginners.



Photo: RNLI

TIDES



A beach can seem like a vast playground but the tide can come in surprisingly quickly. Many lifeboat and lifeguard rescues are to people getting cut off by the rising water. To prevent this happening to you, get local tidal information from the Harbour Master, the tourist information centre and some seaside retail outlets, or visit **bbc.co.uk/weather/coast/tides**. Always keep a look out for the tide's direction while on the beach.

HEALTH

PREPARATION

Before you get in the water it's important to consider your personal fitness as the sea can be a very demanding environment. Swimming is one of the best year-round activities to help prepare your body so we'd recommend you get in the pool and start practising now! Just be aware that sea swimming can be more challenging than the pool so before you start a watersport it's worth jumping in between the red and yellow flags and familiarising yourself with the conditions.



BE SUN SMART

Sunburn can ruin your holiday and increase the risk of skin cancer in later life. According to our friends at the Karen Clifford Skin Cancer Charity Skcin, we experience over half our lifetime's exposure to the sun before we reach the age of 21.

So please, keep safe this Summer and follow the five Ss of sun safety:

- **Sunscreen** – slop on SPF 30+ broad-spectrum waterproof sunscreen every 2 hours
- **Sun hat** – slap on a broad-brimmed hat that shades your face, neck and ears
- **Sunglasses** – wear wrap-around sunglasses with UV protection to shield your eyes
- **Shoulders** – slip on a T-shirt or UV protective suit for children and remember to keep your shoulders covered
- **Shade** – seek shade, particularly during the hottest time of the day between 11am and 3pm when UV penetration is at its strongest

For more info on sun safety visit skcin.org



AND FITNESS

SURF HIRE SAFETY SCHEME

In recent years, over 40% of RNLI lifeguard incidents have been boarding related. This joint venture between the RNLI and the British Surfing Association aims to reduce such incidents. Scheme members have agreed to:

- only rent out equipment suitable to your ability
- provide safety information to all customers
- check equipment regularly for damage
- maintain adequate insurance.

So look out for the logo and choose a scheme member when hiring your board. For more information visit surfhiresafety.co.uk.



TREATING A STING

WEEVER-FISH

These are plain-looking fish that sometimes nestle in the sand, in water just a few centimetres deep. A weever-fish will raise a sharp spine on its back in self defence if trodden on – ouch! Place the affected area in water as hot as you can stand. Test the water first so as not to scald the person who has been stung.

JELLYFISH

If you are stung by a jellyfish, do not rub as this will cause the pain to increase. Lightly spray the area with sea water and apply a cold compress if available. If severe and/or life-threatening symptoms are present, seek medical attention immediately. If you spot a jellyfish, you can report it to the MCS at mcsuk.org.



ALWAYS WEAR PROTECTION!



WETSUITS

A wetsuit will keep you warm and comfortable allowing your body to perform more efficiently.

Wetsuits are generally made from neoprene and are designed to maintain your body's core temperature and protect you from the elements. They work by letting a small amount of water in, holding it next to your body, which then heats up from the natural energy produced during exercise. For this reason it's vital to choose a well-fitted suit to avoid being flushed with cold water. Remember a wetsuit is usually worn with the zip at the back!

Wetsuit thickness is measured in millimetres of neoprene: the thicker the suit the more insulation. As a general rule in the UK most people use full suits, which means long arms and long legs:

- **5:3 = Winter suit** approx Nov-Mar (5mm neoprene core, 3mm limbs)
- **4:3 = Spring suit** approx Apr-Oct (4mm neoprene core, 3mm limbs)
- **3:2 = Summer suit** approx June-Sep (3mm neoprene core, 2mm limbs).



SIGNALLING DEVICE

If you get into difficulty it's tempting to try and swim to safety but you should always stay with your kit as it will keep you afloat and make you easier to find in an emergency. A whistle is a simple and effective method of calling for help when close to shore. When venturing further offshore carry a suitable means of calling for help (waterproof and fully charged VHF or flares). Don't forget the international distress signal of hand waving and shouting for help still works!





HELMET AND HOOD

To protect your head it's always advisable to wear a helmet when learning. Try wearing a neoprene hood if you get cold easily!



BUOYANCY AID

A buoyancy aid is a great confidence builder if you're not comfortable in the water. The buoyancy aid should have a minimum buoyancy of 50 Newtons.



BOOTS AND GLOVES

Boots and gloves are also available to provide additional insulation, protection and grip.



SURF ETIQUETTE

To maximise your enjoyment and keep yourself and others safe when riding waves it's important to understand surf etiquette. Here are a few basic tips that apply to all board riders catching waves. If you are unsure, ask a lifeguard to explain.



PRIORITY CLOSEST TO THE PEAK



DO NOT SNAKE



PRIORITY FURTHEST OUT



PADDLE WIDE NOT THROUGH PEAK



DO NOT DROP IN



CAUGHT INSIDE STAY IN THE WHITE WATER



DO NOT THROW BOARD

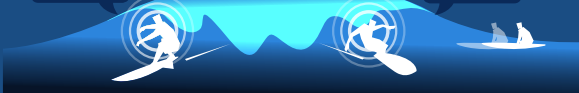


DO NOT DIVE HEAD FIRST

RIGHT!



LEFT!



**PRIORITY FIRST TO FEET OR ON THE WAVE
COMMUNICATE CALL LEFT RIGHT**

ENVIRONMENT

Our coastline supports some of the most important habitats and species. In recognition of this, many areas are legally protected for their wildlife value. These range from statutory sites of national or international significance to smaller, non-statutory sites of local importance.

To protect local wildlife, some sites may have restrictions on certain surfsport activities and it is important to check this before you set off. All surfsport activities should be undertaken with care to prevent damaging fragile environments such as dunes and soft reefs, particularly in sensitive areas or where there are high numbers of people using the beach. Birds can be especially sensitive to disturbance so remember to avoid roosting or nesting sites particularly around high tide.

You can find advice, practical guidance and examples of managing a range of pursuits on the ground, on water and in the air on the Best of Both Worlds website at **bobw.co.uk**. Depending on where you are in the UK, take a look at these websites to find out if the beach you're visiting is in a protected site and what habitats and species you might find:

Natural England

www.naturalengland.org.uk

Countryside Council for Wales

www.ccw.gov.uk

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

www.ni-environment.gov.uk

Scottish Natural Heritage

www.snh.gov.uk





Surfing GB is the national governing body for surfing and bodyboarding. For further information, accredited training centres and recognised schools visit **surfinggb.com** or contact **01637 876474**.

EQUIPMENT

As well as the basic safety equipment, you'll need the following kit to get started:

Board – when selecting a board you need to consider your height, weight and ability. When starting out, a soft foam board is ideal as it is thick and wide, making it easier to float, paddle and catch waves.

Leash – always wear one around the ankle of your back foot so you don't lose your board if you fall off!

Wax – apply this to the deck of your board to give you grip.

Fins – these are vital when bodyboarding to help you catch waves and swim against strong currents.



'Always have a lesson to get you started, always surf with a buddy but, most importantly, *always have fun!*'

Micah Lester

BSA Junior Surf Team Head Coach

Photo: BSA



Photo: Tom Venables



AND BODYBOARDING

STAYING SAFE

ALWAYS:

- follow the advice of the lifeguards
- wear your leash so you don't lose your board
- check your equipment for damage before use
- bodyboard between red and yellow flags but surf between the black and white flags
- consider other water users – learn surf etiquette and rights of way.



NEVER:

- ditch your board – it will keep you afloat in an emergency and make you easier to find
- go alone
- get on the water in conditions above your capability.



WINDSURFING



The **RYA (Royal Yachting Association)** is the national governing body for windsurfing, sailing and powerboating. For information on courses and recognised training centres visit **rya.org.uk** or contact **023 8060 4100**.

EQUIPMENT

As well as the basic personal and safety equipment, you'll need the following kit to get started:



Photo: RYA

Board – an ideal beginners' board should be wide, durable and buoyant.

Beginner/improver:
170–220 litres and
80–90cm wide.



Photo: Naish

Harness – enables you to use your body weight, rather than arm strength, to control the sail.



Photo: RYA

Rig – the 'engine' of a windsurfer, made up of the sail, mast, boom and a mastfoot.

‘Windsurfing is an exciting and addictive sport. It’s a great way to increase fitness, meet new people and explore amazing places. Regardless of your ability, being safe on the water should always be a priority!’

Amanda Van Santen
RYA Chief Windsurfing Instructor

Photo: RYA



Photo: RYA

Photo: RYA

STAYING SAFE

ALWAYS:

- check your equipment for damage before use
- tell someone where you’re going and when you’ll be back
- check the weather forecast and tide times
- consider other water users – learn surf etiquette and rights of way
- launch and recover between the black and white flags
- wear a suitable approved buoyancy aid.



NEVER:

- go alone
- sail in offshore winds without safety boat cover
- get on the water in conditions above your capability
- ditch your board – it will keep you afloat in an emergency and make you easier to find
- leave without a signalling or communication device.



Photo: Dave Leathborough

KAYAKING AND CANOEING



The **BCU (British Canoe Union)** is the national governing body for kayaking and canoeing. For further information, accredited training centres and recognised schools visit bcu.org.uk or contact **0845 370 9500**.

EQUIPMENT

As well as the basic safety equipment, you'll need the following kit to get started:



Boat – beginners should look for an all-round boat that is stable, easy to control, and manoeuvrable. Make sure that it has an adjustable footrest, and preferably a back rest so you can fit it to you. There are many types of kayaks and canoes; ask an expert for advice on what suits your needs.

Paddle – there are many different types of paddle depending on what you are going to be doing; if you are not sure you should definitely get advice on the type and length of paddle.

Spraydeck – the choice to wear a spraydeck depends on both your level of training and the water conditions.



'Canoeing is the most popular and fastest growing watersport in the UK. More than 1.2M people enjoy canoeing every year, so why not give it a try!'

Paul Owen
BCU Chief Executive

Photo: Getty Images

Photo: Lara Tipper



Clothing – paddling in wind and rain or rough seas without adequate clothing can lead to hypothermia so dress accordingly. Wear layered thermal clothing, and wind/waterproof layers, or a wetsuit if you plan to get really wet! Remember to wear a hat on sunny or cold days.'

STAYING SAFE

ALWAYS:

- tell someone where you're going and when you'll be back
- check your equipment for damage before use
- check the weather forecast and tide times
- learn and practise capsize techniques
- launch and recover between the black and white flags
- consider other water users – learn surf etiquette and rights of way
- wear a suitable approved buoyancy aid and helmet.

NEVER:

- go alone
- ditch your craft – it will keep you afloat in an emergency and make you easier to find
- get on the water in conditions above your capability
- leave without a signalling or communication device
- underestimate the forces of nature and be aware of your environment.





The **BKSA (British Kitesurfing Association)** is the national governing body for kitesurfing. For further information on recognised training schools visit **kitesurfing.org** or contact **01305 813555**.

EQUIPMENT

As well as the basic safety equipment, you'll need the following kit to get started:



Relaunchable kite – these are inflated with a pump to give the framework buoyancy and structure. The kite is manufactured using marine-grade ripstop and dacron.



Bar and lines – used as the connection to the kite and a means of steering; also incorporated are all the safety devices that enable depowering of the kite almost instantly.



Boards – these come in many sizes; twin tips are most common, which can be ridden in either direction, and surfboards are used where there are waves.



Harness – this enables your body to take the load and power of the kite while your arms steer and control the kite.

‘Kiting is amazing; one day you can be doing tricks and the next be in waves on a surfboard. It’s important to get lessons at a BKSA school to learn this exciting sport easily and safely’

Sam Light
UK Freestyle Champion

Photo: BKSA

Photo: BKSA/Kiteboarder

KITESURFING

STAYING SAFE

ALWAYS:

- tell someone where you’re going and when you’ll be back
- check your equipment for damage before use
- wear your kite leash
- consider other water users – learn surf etiquette and rights of way
- secure your kite firmly when on the beach and wind up lines if not in use
- wear a suitably fitted approved buoyancy aid and helmet
- launch and recover between the black and white flags.



NEVER:

- ride in conditions above your capability (no wind above 20 knots in your first year)
- get someone to land and launch your kite who has not received training
- ride or launch near other beach users, animals or objects on the land or in the water
- ride in offshore winds without safety boat cover.



The **BSUPA (British Stand Up Paddle Association)** is the national body for stand-up paddleboarding. For further information, accredited training centres and recognised schools visit **bsupa.org.uk** or contact **info@bsupa.org.uk**.

EQUIPMENT

Together with the basic safety equipment, you'll need the following kit to get started:



Paddleboard – many sizes and shapes from around 2.5m to 5.5m. It's ideal to start with a board around 3.4m long by 75cm wide.

Paddle – you need a good paddle, as long as your height plus 20cm.

Leash – use a heavy-duty leash the same length as the board.

‘Riding a SUP is fun in both flat water and in surf; it’s a sport that is great for the whole family and has some real health benefits including overall fitness and core strength, and it’s a good stress reliever.’

Simon Bassett
BSUPA Head Coach

Photo: BSUPA



Photo: Jon Parker

Photo: BSUPA

STAYING SAFE

ALWAYS:

- tell someone where you’re going and when you’ll be back
- wear your leash so you don’t lose your board
- launch and recover between the black and white flags
- check the weather forecast and tide times
- consider other water users – learn surf etiquette and rights of way
- find a quieter spot if the line-up is really busy.



NEVER:

- leave without a signalling or communication device
- paddle in offshore winds without safety boat cover
- underestimate the forces of nature but be aware of your environment
- ditch your board – it will keep you afloat in an emergency and make you easier to find
- get on the water in conditions above your capability.

THE RNLI

THE ROYAL NATIONAL LIFEBOAT INSTITUTION IS THE CHARITY THAT SAVES LIVES AT SEA.

LIFEBOATS AND LIFEGUARDS

We operate over 230 lifeboat stations in the UK and RoI, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Since the RNLI was founded in 1824, our volunteer lifeboat crews have saved more than 139,000 lives – rescuing around 8,000 people every year.

Nowadays, our lifeguards work with lifeboat crews to provide a seamless rescue service from the beach to the open sea. Our seasonal lifeguard service operates on over 160 beaches in the UK and it responds to more than 16,000 incidents a year.

When someone is drowning in the surf seconds count, so we need expert lifesavers on the beach ready to act. As much as 95% of our lifeguards' work is preventative – that is, they look out for potential problems before they develop into something worse, and give proactive advice and information to beach goers.

FUNDED BY YOU

The RNLI aims to continue expanding its lifeguard service across the whole country and, as a charity, the RNLI relies on voluntary financial support including gifts in Wills, which help fund 6 out of 10 lifeboat launches.

With more people using our beaches and seas, the demand on our services is greater than ever and our running costs average over £335,000 a day. Will you help us meet that need?



LIFESAVING ADVICE AND INFORMATION

A range of free resources and practical advice are available to promote sea, beach and commercial fishing safety and to support primary and secondary school teachers.

ORDINARY PEOPLE, EXTRAORDINARY ACTS

People from all walks of life help the RNLI to save lives at sea. Thousands of volunteer crew members, lifeguards, shore helpers, committee members and fundraisers give their time, skill and commitment, supported by specialist staff.

Training is vital – it turns volunteers into lifesavers. Every year the RNLI delivers the highest quality of training at its college in Poole, at its lifeboat stations and on the beaches.

Phone 0800 543210 or go to [RNLI.org.uk](https://www.rnli.org.uk) to donate now and help save lives at sea. Thank you.



Lifeguards

If you see someone in difficulty, never attempt a rescue. Tell a lifeguard or, if you can't see a lifeguard, call **999** or **112** and ask for the Coastguard



Organisation/Club stamp

Royal National Lifeboat Institution
West Quay Road, Poole, Dorset, BH15 1HZ
Tel: 0845 122 6999
Email: beachsafety@RNLI.org.uk
Web: RNLI.org.uk/beachsafety



The RNLI is the charity that saves lives at sea

Registered in England and Wales (209603) and Scotland (SC037736).

Charity number CHY 2678 in the Republic of Ireland

SAP code: BEA019