

It's Sink Or Swim

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
June 2015

A dip can be deadly for your pet



his time of year, I'm reminded how important water safety is for pets. Just last month a client's shepherd mix wound up in a canal behind her Miami Beach home. Without the heroics of a passerby who witnessed the dog's panic and jumped into the water from a crossover bridge to rescue him, things might not have ended well.

Water safety is also a serious issue for humans in South Florida. According to the Florida Department of Health, 440 residents accidentally drowned in swimming pools and open waters in 2012. After Broward County, Miami-Dade has the second-highest rate of this type of death. From 2011 to 2013 in Miami-Dade alone, there were 91 drownings, and 68 percent of these accidents occurred April through September.

Rather sobering stats, no? Unfortunately, we don't have rock-solid numbers on pet drownings, but local pet pros are aware of the dangers for dogs and cats in recreational water.

Every year, veterinarian Mieke Baks of North Miami's Siegel TLC says she expects to treat a couple of pets pulled out of pools and waterways, and sees one drowning death. For South Beach dog trainer Russell Hartstein of Fun Paw Care: "Client interest in water safety precautions has come up a number of times. We either teach dogs to swim and be comfortable in the water or train them to stay away from pools and spas."

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Lowering the risks by adopting child-safety procedures for our furry friends is the way to go.

Adult supervision prevents most pool accidents -- period. Active pets can slip and fall into the water. If unnoticed, they may tread water and scratch fruitlessly at the nearest wall to the point of exhaustion. This is how most pets drown.

Swimming classes start early for kids; it's a big mistake, though, to think all dogs are natural swimmers. Short-legged breeds, those with low body fat, and heavily muscular dogs make terrible swimmers.

Water newbies typically use only their front legs to paddle; going nowhere in this vertical position, they're prone to panic or fatigue. Every pool owner ought to teach the family dog to swim over to the shallow end and climb out via the steps.

This takes patience -- and *not* the "throw-'em-in" technique. Using a leash, the dog is led into the deep area, then back to the shallow side. It's important to encourage your dog to exit on the steps and to lavish praise for a job well done; repetition imprints this new behavior.

Pool fencing isn't fool-proof, but it's often enough to keep pets out of the pool. Some brands come with self-closing gates that are key-lockable. Certain communities require fencing around swimming pools but deny permits for permanent fencing along seawalls. These removable mesh barriers might be an acceptable alternative.

Stay far, far away from floating pool covers. They don't mix with backyard pets and can be quite dangerous. Covers can collapse under an animal's weight, trapping it underneath.

Living on Biscayne Canal, I see a fair amount of boats go by, often with canine companions on board. I rarely see one wearing a life jacket. A flotation vest will keep a dog buoyant if it falls in the water. An essential feature is a lifting strap or handle, which makes it much easier to get that big, wet puppy back inside the boat. Brightly colored vests with reflective tape heighten visibility in the water.

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Gadget lovers can really get into pool alarms. A floating alarm alerts when something falls and makes a splash in the water. It emits a warning sound at poolside and sends a signal to a monitoring station inside the house. One flaw is that it fails to alert if something merely *walks* into the water.

Terrapin's Safety Turtle is a wearable alarm system. Clipped to a pet collar, the adapter senses when it's underwater and signals the base unit, which then triggers the alarm. As a nifty plus, it can also be used on a child's wrist band.

My favorite water safety product isn't high tech, but it is practical and costs under \$100. An easy-to-see, white floating ramp helps critters -- even wayward squirrels, frogs, and snakes -- to get out of the pool unassisted. The white color is key since it can be seen by all animals, even at night.

It attaches to the side of pools, seawalls and boats. The best part is, you don't have to be present in order for it to save lives. Skamper-Ramp, advertised as a water-safety escape ramp, is made of plastic perforated with dozens of grab holes, allowing animals to pull themselves out from the water. The day after that dog was rescued from the Miami Beach canal, its owner ordered a Skamper-Ramp to hook up to her seawall. Smart lady.

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