

Drowning Increases in the U.S.

Making swimming lessons more accessible can save lives



Printed from [CDC Vital Signs, May 14, 2024](#).

#1

Drowning is the number one cause of death for children ages 1–4.

55%

Over half (55%) of U.S. adults have never taken a swimming lesson.

28%

Drowning death rates for Black people were 28% higher in 2021 than in 2019.

Drowning deaths were higher in recent years

Over 4,500 people drowned each year in the United States from 2020–2022. This is about 500 more drowning deaths each year compared to 2019. Groups already at higher risk saw the greatest increases in deaths, including young children and older adults of all races and ethnicities, and Black people of all ages.

Drowning deaths differed by age

- **Drowning is the leading cause of death among children ages 1–4.**
 - Drowning increased by 28% among children ages 1–4 in 2022 compared to 2019.
- **Adults 65 years of age and older had the second highest rate of drowning.**
 - Drowning increased by 19% in adults ages 65–74 in 2022 compared to 2019.

Drowning deaths differed by race and ethnicity

- **American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN) people had higher drowning rates than any other race and ethnic group.**
 - Although drowning did not increase among AIAN people during 2020–2022, rates in this group remained higher than those of any other race or ethnicity.
- **Black people have the second highest drowning rates.**
 - In 2021, drowning increased 28% among Black people compared to 2019.

40 million adults do not know how to swim

Basic swimming and water safety skills training is a proven, effective way to prevent drowning. Some groups of people are less likely to report taking swimming lessons.

- **More than 1 in 3 Black adults (37%) reported not knowing how to swim compared to 15% of all adults.**
- **About 2 in 3 Black adults (63%) reported never taking a swimming lesson.**
- **About 3 in 4 Hispanic adults (72%) reported never taking a swimming lesson.**

Differences in access to swimming lessons are one barrier that could contribute to these outcomes. Swimming lessons can be expensive or may not be available in some communities. When swimming lessons are available, some people may be hesitant to participate due to complex social and cultural factors. Everyone should have access to basic swimming and water safety skills training.

The [U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan](#) (watersafetyusa.org/nwsap) helps states and local communities identify actions that can prevent drowning. The plan has specific recommendations for improving basic swimming and water safety skills training. It focuses on increasing access to swimming lesson programs that meet community needs.



Challenges

Identifying issues that increase drowning risk

Identifying why drowning has increased and why some groups of people or communities are at higher risk requires better data. We need to understand how to make basic swimming and water safety skills training more accessible. Reported barriers include:

- **Swimming lessons too expensive or not accessible.**
- **Fear of water.**
- **Pool setting or training not welcoming.**
- **Feeling uncomfortable wearing traditional swimwear.**

Many more barriers exist, and some are complex and not well understood. We can develop and carry out inclusive programs that best meet each community's needs when we understand a community's unique social and cultural elements. Better data give us that insight.



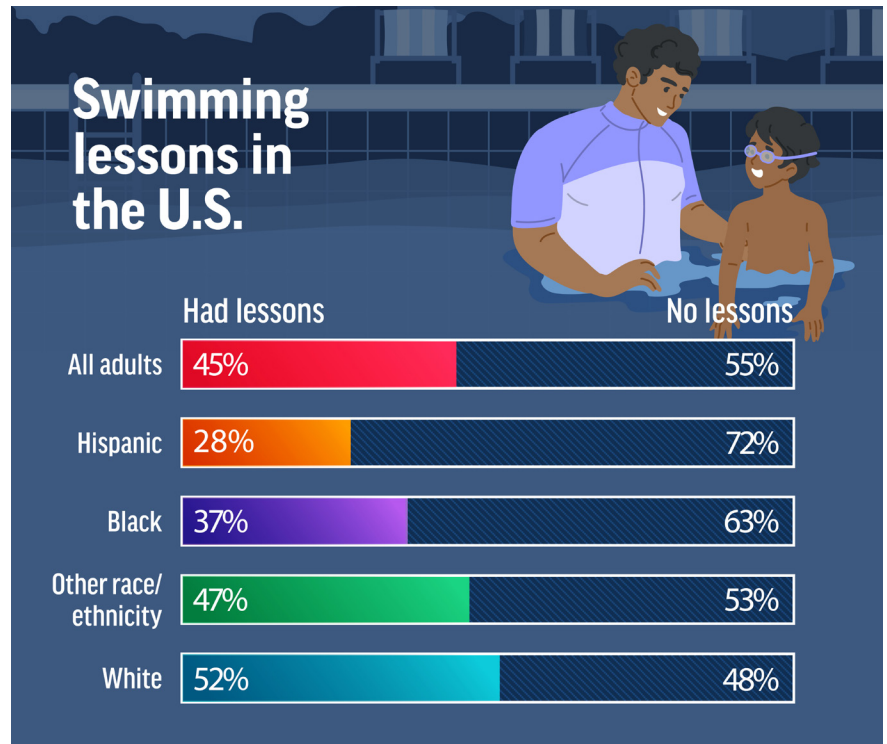
Historical and social factors and the pandemic may be contributing to inequities

Many Black, American Indian, and Alaska Native people report lack of access to pools as a barrier to swimming lessons. Racial segregation led to few options and many of the available pools were often poorly maintained or too shallow for swimming. Many public pools closed after racial desegregation and communities built fewer new pools over the decades. The legacy of this and other discrimination may influence current generations' attitudes about and participation in swimming lessons.

During the pandemic, many public pools closed, which limited the availability of swimming lessons. Once pools reopened, many facilities faced shortages of trained swimming instructors and lifeguards. This has further reduced access to swimming lessons.

Over half of U.S. adults have never taken a swimming lesson

Only 28% of Hispanic people and 37% of Black people have taken swimming lessons.



Take steps to reduce drowning risk

Increasing access to basic swimming and water safety skills training can reduce the risk of drowning. Here are 5 tips to get started.

Community actions to reduce drowning risk

- Build and revitalize public pools**: Illustration of two construction workers in safety gear reviewing plans.
- Hire diverse aquatics staff**: Illustration of a lifeguard in a red cap and life preserver, and a group of diverse children swimming in a pool.
- Adapt programs to community needs**: Illustration of a lifeguard in a blue wetsuit and a group of diverse people swimming in a pool.
- Ensure access for people with disabilities**: Illustration of a lifeguard next to a sign that reads "POOL/SPA LIFT AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST".
- Offer affordable swimming and water safety lessons**: Illustration of a lifeguard at a pool desk with a sign that reads "NOTICE NO SWIMMING UNLESS LIFEGUARD IS PRESENT ON POOL DECK".

What Can Be Done

Public health professionals and state, local, tribal, and territorial governments can

- Make basic swimming and water safety skills training available and affordable for everyone in your community.
- Determine whether new policies or laws are needed to improve access to safe swimming.
- Identify areas that don't have safe places to swim or take swimming lessons. Build or revitalize pools in these areas.
- Make it a priority to have diverse, equitable, culturally appropriate, and inclusive swimming and water safety skills training.
- Use the U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan [watersafetyusa.org/nwsap] to create state and local action plans. CDC was one of many contributors to the plan, which was created by drowning prevention organizations and hundreds of volunteer experts across the country.

U.S. NATIONAL WATER SAFETY ACTION PLAN



Aquatics training providers can

- Assess community needs to understand barriers that keep people from taking swimming lessons.
- Use or adapt existing aquatic programs that demonstrate respect and cultural understanding of people in your community so everyone feels welcome.
- Identify partners in your community that can help you connect with people at the highest risk of drowning.
- Ensure water safety information is part of swimming lessons, such as wearing life jackets and supervising children in or near the water.

CDC supports young families by working with partners in several ways. These include collecting data to better understand drowning risk and barriers to swimming lessons and working with partners to improve access to effective basic swimming and water safety skills training, especially for people at increased risk of drowning.

Find swimming lessons in your area

[The YMCA](https://www.ymca.org/)

cdc.gov/drowning/partners/ymca

[The American Red Cross](https://www.redcross.org/)

cdc.gov/drowning/partners/red-cross

[U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan](https://watersafetyusa.org/nwsap)

cdc.gov/drowning/partners/usnwsap

Everyone can

- Learn how to swim. Take basic swimming and water safety skills training. This is hands-on training that takes place in the water.
- Make sure children get basic swimming and water safety skills training.
- Find swimming lessons in your area.
- Pay close attention to children—even those who have had swimming lessons—whenever they are in or near water, including pools, bathtubs, and even buckets of water.
- Avoid drinking alcohol before and during swimming and boating, and wear life jackets.

See [Preventing Drowning](https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/prevention/) (cdc.gov/drowning/prevention) for more drowning prevention tips.