



July Fourth is frenzied, dangerous: Sheriffs, doctors urge care when having fun

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June 27--The Fourth of July is an injury-prone, sometimes deadly holiday.

Hot weather combines with heavy alcohol consumption, big crowds engaged in boating and other water sports, jammed highways and the annual tradition of fireworks. The result can be high accident risks and a spike in injuries and deaths.

Emergency room doctors see the results, especially after dark.

"The Fourth itself is quiet, but that night we'll get busy with sunburn, alcohol-related car accidents, firecracker burns," said emergency room physician Dr. Lionel Bodzin of the Henry Ford Medical Center in Sterling Heights.

"Even just sparklers cause numerous burns to the extremities" -- fingers and feet -- especially when young children use them unsupervised, Bodzin said.

Fourth of July holiday deaths from driving and boating have declined for decades, as cars and boats added safety features and police put on special patrols.

But this year, the number of drivers statewide over the Fourth of July weekend is expected to jump 20% from last year, to 1.2 million in Michigan, as the recovering economy puts more vacationers on the road, AAA Michigan said. And budget cutbacks have Oakland County marine patrols covering only 13 lakes, down from 27 last year, marine unit commander Sgt. Matt Snyder said.

"Even with the staffing of years past, I'd still be concerned with a holiday weekend. With our reduced patrols, I'm even more concerned this year," Snyder said.

More drivers, fewer lake cops add danger in 2010

Safer than it used to be, the Fourth of July holiday is still a busy time for police and emergency room staffs.

"More people are out and about, experiencing the water and fireworks, drinking alcohol, driving, and some of them take chances because they're in a crowd and it's a holiday," Oakland County Sheriff Mike Bouchard said.

Here's an overview of ways to minimize the risks to you and family members:

Swimming and diving

Drownings in mid-June of a 12-year-old girl in Oak Park and a 16-year-old boy in Shelby Township -- both occurring amid crowds of oblivious swimmers -- along with eight drownings statewide over Memorial Day weekend, show the need for parents and other adults to be vigilant, said registered nurse Kathy Robbins of Sylvan Lake.

"I see these stories about drownings, and I want it to be a wake-up call for parents. They need to teach their child this life skill and then supervise as long as they can," said Robbins, a certified scuba diver.

The biggest threat around water may be alcohol intake. Swimmers who are drinking can get so disoriented that, panicking underwater, they have been known to swim down toward a lake bottom instead of up, police said.

Countless crippling diving injuries could be prevented if people simply jumped feet first into a lake, river or even most swimming pools, said aquatic accident attorney Ron Gilbert of Fenton.

Even in the middle of a lake there can be a shallow spot that leaves a diver paralyzed, Gilbert said.

Boating

Few may understand the importance of boating safety more than Jan Willhite-Iserman, whose teenage daughter was killed while driving a personal watercraft on a Commerce Township lake in 2004.

Willhite-Iserman of Rochester Hills founded the Ashleigh Iserman Boating Safety Foundation in her daughter's name and recently raised \$4,000 with a 5K run . She said she donated the money to the Oakland County Sheriff's Office's marine division.

With cutbacks this year in marine patrols, Willhite-Iserman encourages people to take boating safety classes.

"People are just going to have to be more cautious," she said. "Just take that extra step to make sure you have everything in check."

Oakland County's marine patrols were expected to be on 13 lakes for the holiday weekend, down from 27 last year, because of budget cuts, officials said.

Macomb County Sheriff's Capt. Tony Wickersham said eight full-time personnel are assigned to the marine division this summer, down from nine last summer. But the division has a reserve unit of more than 100 volunteers, Wickersham said.

The Wayne County Sheriff's Office Marine Unit is down to four officers from five in 2008 and eight in 2009, spokeswoman Paula Bridges said.

A special holiday concern for marine patrols is drinking boaters who cruise at night, often to watch fireworks shows.

Boaters who drink often fail to wear a personal flotation device, adding danger, Bouchard said.

According to a U.S. Coast Guard Web site warning, "about 90% of those who drowned would be alive today" if they had worn a life jacket.

"I'd say about half our boating accidents involve alcohol," Bouchard said.

"When you're on a boat, the sun and dehydration magnify the effect of alcohol, so it can really impair your decisions and your motor skills for piloting the boat."

Virtually all boats in Michigan, even kayaks and canoes, must have at least one personal flotation device aboard for each person. The state had 36 boating fatalities in 2009, far fewer than the 88 reported in 1967, according to the Livonia-based Michigan Boating Industries Association.

Driving

The continuation of decades of extra police patrols on summer holidays, along with fewer drivers on the road because of Michigan's recession, brought traffic fatalities to a record low last July Fourth, according to the Michigan State Police.

From 48 statewide traffic deaths over the July Fourth holiday in 1972, there was just one last year -- of a pedestrian in Wayne County, State Police spokeswoman Lynn Sutfin said, in the Office of Highway Safety Planning.

But this year, "pack your patience" because the easing recession is expected to lure 20% more drivers than a year ago. A projected 1.2 million drivers might travel Michigan roads for the holiday, up from 1 million last year, AAA Michigan spokeswoman Nancy Cain said.

Adding enforcement will be Michigan's new ban on text messaging by drivers. That law will go into effect Thursday.

"The police can pull you over solely because they saw you texting," bringing a \$100 fine for a first offense, \$200 for subsequent ones, she said.

Fireworks

A bill in Lansing would ease restrictions on fireworks, allowing those that are sold in Indiana, Ohio and Wisconsin to be sold in Michigan.

Emergency room doctors said most fireworks injuries could be prevented if users would supervise young people, keep sparklers away from small children and "never try to relight a dud," said Bodzin.

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