

Prepare for “Extended Breath-Holding” Inquires Due to Upcoming “Oprah” Episode

On Wednesday, April 30, magician David Blaine is scheduled to attempt to break the underwater breath-holding Guinness World Record on the Oprah Winfrey Show. Blaine is planning to hold his breath for over 16 minutes and 14 seconds while submerged in an aquarium filled with more than 2,500 gallons of water.

The practice of voluntarily hyperventilating (extremely rapid or deep breathing) followed by holding one’s breath and then swimming underwater or holding one’s breath for extended periods of time is dangerous and can be fatal. According to Oprah.com, Blaine is facing possible heart failure, brain damage and even death with taking on this challenge. The Red Cross strongly urges that people **do not** try to duplicate any part of Blaine’s attempt.

Lifeguards and Water Safety instructors should take action to prevent these incidents from occurring by immediately stopping patrons and students from hyperventilating or holding their breath underwater. If you are unsure whether or not a swimmer who is underwater is in trouble, respond as if it were an emergency.

Hyperventilation and Extended Breath-Holding Talking Points

Review the following talking points in case you receive inquiries:

- The practice of voluntarily hyperventilating followed by underwater swimming or holding one’s breath under water is dangerous. The Red Cross strongly urges that people, **do not** try to duplicate any part of Blaine’s attempt.
- Hyperventilating is a dangerous technique some swimmers use to try to swim long distances underwater or to try to hold their breath for an extended period while submerged in one place.
- Some swimmers mistakenly think that by taking a series of deep breaths in rapid succession and forcefully exhaling, they can increase the amount of oxygen they breathe, allowing them to hold their breath longer underwater. This is not true. Instead, it lowers the carbon dioxide level in the body. Even highly skilled swimmers can die from this practice.
- The practice of voluntarily hyperventilating followed by underwater swimming or holding one’s breath underwater is risky because it lowers the carbon dioxide level in the body. The level of carbon dioxide in the blood is what signals a person to breathe.
- When a person hyperventilates and then swims underwater, the oxygen level in the blood can drop to a point where the swimmer passes out before the body knows it is time to breathe. Then, when the unconscious person finally does take a breath instinctively, water rushes in, laryngospasm (a spasm of the vocal cords which blocks the airway to keep fluid or food out of the airway) occurs and the drowning process begins.
- The Red Cross warns participants in its Lifeguarding, Water Safety Instructors and Safety Training for Swim Coaches courses about the dangers of hyperventilating and extended breath-holding.
- The Red Cross urges any lifeguard or swim instructor to immediately prevent these incidents from occurring by stopping patrons from hyperventilating or holding their breath underwater. If unsure whether or not a swimmer who is underwater is in trouble, the staff should take action and treat the situation as an emergency.
- The Red Cross urges all aquatic facility staff to educate their patrons about the dangers of hyperventilation and extended breath-holding and take steps to prohibit them at their facilities.

If you have questions, contact instructorcorner@usa.redcross.org.