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NO ICE IS SAFE ICE!

Posted in Issues In Safety & Rescue by Gerald M. Dworkin

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This tragic scenario is seen each winter across the country. Such needless deaths occur through recklessness, carelessness, or ignorance regarding proper locations for skating or ice fishing and proper rescue procedures for someone who has fallen through the ice.

Ice strength depends upon thickness, snow cover, changes in temperature, depth of the water under the ice, water flow (current), and water level. Schools of fish under the ice will also affect the integrity of the ice. The following principles should be adhered to at all ponds and lakes where ice skating or ice fishing activities take place.

1. Ice clouded with air bubbles should be avoided. Although it may appear as solid ice, this ice is typically weak!. Ice must freeze to a uniform depth of at least four inches before it is firm enough for group skating or ice fishing.
2. Skaters and others should not go near partially submerged obstacles such as stumps and rocks where ice is weaker, and these dangerous areas should be clearly identified and avoided.
3. Ice over moving water is probably unsafe and should be avoided.
4. Ice should be examined for man-made hazards such as where ice has broken or been cut, and these hazards should be clearly identified.
5. Never permit skating or ice fishing alone. Adults should constantly supervise children skating, and skating should occur within a restricted area.

When a person falls through the ice, he or she should not attempt to climb out immediately, but rather, should kick to the surface and get horizontal in the water with their legs back of the torso, rather than underneath, in order to avoid jackknifing the body beneath the ice. Once the body is horizontal, the person should attempt to slide forward onto the ice. Once out of the water, the person should avoid standing near the broken ice. Roll away from the break area instead until you are several body lengths away from the ice break. A set of ice awls are ideal for use by rescuers or victims alike. The ice awl consists of a foam-filled plastic shaft with retractable sheaths that cover a metal ice pick. When the ice awl is jammed down onto the ice, the retractable sheath exposes the pick which allows the would-be rescuer to crawl out to the victim, or the victim the opportunity to crawl and pick his way out of the ice hole onto solid ice.

When an attempt is made to rescue someone who has fallen through ice, the rescuer must be protected from danger. Any device that helps to distribute the weight of the rescuer over a wide area will lessen the possibility that the ice will continue to break. Some type of equipment should always be used to extend the reach of the rescuer and thereby avoid the possibility of the victim dragging the rescuer into the water. Hockey sticks, ropes, tree branches, ladders, belts, and so forth are all suited to this purpose. A water cooler with a line attached makes an excellent buoyant and rescue aid.

A flat-bottomed boat, canoe or kayak also serves as excellent means to effect an ice rescue. These craft can easily be slid along the ice until contact is made with the victim. If the ice breaks under the boat or rescuers, they have a good rescue platform to continue the rescue or retreat to the safety of the shoreline. Whenever possible, the boat should be tethered with a safety line to shore.

Where no regular or improvised rescue devices are available, it may be necessary to form a human chain to effect a rescue. To form this chain, several rescuers approach as closely as they can within safety and then lie prone upon the ice, forming a chain. Each person holds tightly to the skaters' ankles or skates of the person ahead of him. When the lead person grasps the victim, the person nearest shore pulls the others back. If the ice breaks under the weight of the leading person in the chain, the individual can be held and drawn to safety by the others.

Victims of skating and other ice accidents may require emergency resuscitation procedures which need to be administered immediately while the victim is moved to a shelter. When the victim is brought to shore breathing, the rescuers should warm the victim as rapidly as possible. Bring the victim indoors, remove wet clothing, and wrap the victim's trunk in blankets until it is possible to immerse the person in warm water (102 degrees-105 degrees Fahrenheit). During the rewarming process, avoid rewarming the extremities until the core temperature is back to normal. The victim should also be examined by a physician.

The establishment of a safety post at all ponds and lakes where the public may gather for ice skating or ice fishing is recommended. This safety post would consist of the following:

Post – a 6 foot two-by-four, preferably painted yellow and set about two feet into the ground. About one foot from the top of the post, attach a spike or arm to hold a coiled rope and water jug.

Jug – a gallon plastic jug with an inch of antifreeze solution or water inside to provide weight for throwing. Paint "For Emergency Only" on exposed sides of the jug. A commercial Rescue Throw Bag with 75′ of attached line is ideal for this application.

Line – Approximately 40 feet by 60 inches in length made of polypropylene. Securely tie one end to the handle of the plastic jug and tie a large knot at the other end to prevent slipping through the hands of the rescuers.
Pole – a ten-foot or twelve-foot bamboo pole or suitable sapling. Secure the pole to the post through two six-ounce cans nailed near the post's bottom about six inches apart.

Ladder – a six-foot to eight-foot makeshift wooden ladder should be attached to the pole to distribute weight of rescuers if necessary when rescuing.

Ice skating and ice fishing areas should be uniformly marked in order to identify approved areas with good conditions as well as restricted or prohibited areas. One means of identification is the use of colored flags using green for skating/ice fishing allowed; yellow for restricted areas; and red for no skating/ice fishing.

When flags are used, a key should be provided on a sign explaining the color system. Another method would use universal signage graphics depicting a skater for skating allowed, and the same sign with a slash through it for no skating.

If recreation supervisors are assigned to skating facilities, they should be trained and certified in emergency first aid and CPR. In addition, appropriate first aid and resuscitation equipment should be available. In addition, if ice skating lakes or ponds are established by a municipality, with supervision provided by staff, these persons should have appropriate ice rescue training and should be equipped with ice/cold water rescue suits. These suits are designed to keep the rescuer warm, afloat, and dry in ice water and are ideal devices for use during ice rescue operations. Local Fire, Rescue, and Law Enforcement agencies should also be equipped with these suits, and should be provided appropriate rescue and survival training as well.

With such safety precautions in place, the public is assured essentially safe skating and ice fishing opportunities and tragedies are unlikely.

NOTE: We encourage our readers to view the footage of an ice rescue incident that occurred during the winter of 2012 in California when a single victim fell through the ice. This incident then escalated with 11 additional victims in the water, all of which fell through the ice while trying to save that victim.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtZIda3WoWg&feature=youtu.be