

Dry Drowning and Other Submersion Injuries

Definition: Recent news reports have brought much attention to the phenomenon of “dry drowning”. Dry drowning is very rare event that can occur after a child has experienced a recent incident of struggling in the water while swimming. During the frightening episode, the child inhales water. The water, however, never reaches the lungs but instead, the child’s vocal cords spasm and close up after he’s already away from the water. Airways become constricted, making it hard to breathe. Symptoms occur shortly after the incident in the water.

Another very rare submersion injury sometimes known as “secondary drowning” can occur after a near drowning episode where the child does actually take water into the lungs. With secondary drownings, symptoms occur 1-24 hours later.

Symptoms: Both dry and secondary drowning have similar symptoms including coughing, chest pain, and trouble breathing. The child may become irritable, lethargic and look pale and dusky. Always watch your child closely for 24 hours after any problem in the water. Often the symptoms are mild and will resolve on their own, however, it is always important to have your child assessed by a pediatrician following any near drowning incident.

Prevention: Of course, prevention is key. Always watch your child closely when he/she is in or near water. Do not get distracted by a phone or friend. Sign up your child for swim lessons at an early age. Never let your child swim alone or without a lifeguard present. If you have a pool in your backyard, make sure it is completely fenced. Warn teenagers of the increased risk of drowning when drugs or alcohol are involved. Be aware that submersion injuries can occur in even a small amount of water such as baths, toilets, wash pails etc.

Resources:

Dry drowning and secondary drownings: what to know by Amanda Gardner

Submersion Injuries in Pediatric Population by Ashley Grigsby July 22, 2013 Medscape