Facts about rip currents

◆ Rip current speeds vary. Average speeds are 1-2 feet per second, but they have been measured as fast as 8 feet per second—faster than an Olympic swimmer!
◆ Rip currents can be very narrow or more than 50 yards wide.
◆ Sometimes rip currents end just beyond the line of breaking waves; however, they may continue to pull hundreds of yards offshore.
◆ Rip currents do not pull people under the water—they pull people away from shore.
◆ Rip currents are not “undertow” or “riptides.” These improper terms should not be used to describe them.

Safety tips

◆ Know how to swim.
◆ Never swim alone.
◆ For maximum safety, swim near a lifeguard.
◆ Obey all instructions and orders from lifeguards.
◆ Be cautious at all times.
◆ If in doubt, don’t go out!

Where can I get more information about rip currents?

◆ Before you leave for the beach, check the latest National Weather Service forecast for local beach conditions. Many offices issue a Surf Zone Forecast.
◆ When you arrive at the beach, ask on-duty lifeguards about rip currents and any other hazards that may be present.
◆ More information about rip currents can be found at the following web sites:
  www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov
  www.usla.org

United States Lifesaving Association statistics indicate that the chance of death by drowning at a beach protected by lifeguards is 1 in 18 million.
Rip currents account for 80% of rescues performed by surf beach lifeguards.

What are rip currents?
- Rip currents are channelized currents of water flowing away from shore at surf beaches.
- Rip currents typically form at breaks in sandbars, and also near structures such as jetties and piers.
- Rip currents are quite common and can be found on many surf beaches every day, including Great Lakes beaches.

Why are rip currents dangerous?
- Rip currents pull people away from shore.
- Rip current speeds can vary from moment to moment and can quickly increase to become dangerous to anyone entering the surf.
- Rip currents can sweep even the strongest swimmer out to sea.

What are some clues that a rip current may be present?
- A channel of churning, choppy water.
- A difference in water color.
- A line of foam, seaweed or debris moving seaward.
- A break in the incoming wave pattern.

What if I’m caught in a rip current?
- Stay calm.
- Don’t fight the current.
- Escape the current by swimming in a direction following the shoreline. When free of the current, swim at an angle away from the current—toward shore.
- If you are unable to escape by swimming, float or tread water. When the current weakens, swim at an angle away from the current toward shore.
- If at any time you feel you will be unable to reach shore, draw attention to yourself: face the shore, call or wave for help.

How do I help someone else?
- Get help from a lifeguard.
- If a lifeguard is not present, yell instructions on how to escape.
- If possible, throw the rip current victim something that floats.
- Call 9-1-1 for further assistance.

Dr. Tom Herrington, Stevens Institute of Technology
Lifeguard Captain Nick Steers, County of Los Angeles Fire Department

Rip currents often generate a plume of sediment moving away from shore.

A lifeguard rescues a swimmer caught in a rip current.

Rip currents often form near coastal structures.