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BREATH-HOLD UNDERWATER DIVING

Statement of the YMCA of the USA Medical Advisory Committee

The practice of extended breath-hold underwater diving has become a popular competitive event but has significant dangers associated with it, including brain damage and death by drowning. Individuals who perform this activity competitively train themselves to resist the urge to breathe to see how far they can swim underwater while holding their breath. This activity is not a safe practice in YMCA aquatic programs. To increase awareness and safety within YMCA aquatic facilities and programs, the YMCA of the USA Medical Advisory Committee recommends the following safety precautions and recommendations:

1. YMCAs should prohibit extended underwater breath-hold diving. For training purposes in programs such as swim teams and skin/scuba diving, under the direct supervision of a coach or instructor, moderate underwater breath-hold swimming that is normal and reasonable is permissible.
2. Under no circumstances should a YMCA allow the practice of "static apnea" (where a person is motionless underwater or facedown on the surface and holding one's breath). This activity is performed to see how long one can hold his or her breath. Due to the extreme physiological danger of latent anoxia (blackout), this activity should be prohibited.
3. Prior to any underwater breath-hold swimming, a coach or instructor should explain to participants that hyperventilation (more than four rapid inhalations and exhalations) is dangerous and should not be performed, and that the participant should exhale periodically during the underwater swim.
4. At no time should even moderate underwater breath-hold swimming, snorkeling, or skin diving occur without the direct, uninterrupted supervision of a coach or instructor. Extended underwater breath-hold diving is not recommended at any time.

November 1999

Revised January 2004

November 2008

Reaffirmed February 2011