



Joint Statement from the American Red Cross and YMCA of the USA on Hypoxic Blackout and Inaccurate Use of the Terminology Shallow Water Blackout

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: FOR MEDIA ONLY

YMCA of the USA Public Relations
312-419-8418, media@ymca.net

Red Cross Public Affairs
202-303-5551, media@redcross.org

CHICAGO, May 27, 2015 – The practices of hyperventilation preceding underwater swimming and extended breath-holding in the water are dangerous and potentially deadly activities. These activities can put the body in a state of hypoxia—a condition in which the body is deprived of adequate oxygen supply. It is our goal to educate those that we teach about the risks of hypoxia in the water and help ensure that they do not engage in behavior that could result in loss of consciousness and death. This includes lifeguards, swim instructors and swim coaches, participants in our learn to swim programs and their parents as well as the general public who engages in aquatic activities.

The result of these activities is referred to by some as “shallow water blackout.” The use of this terminology in these cases is misleading since water depth is not a factor in the body’s response to hyperventilation and extended breath-holding. Shallow water blackout is the medical condition that can result in unconsciousness in water that is typically less than 15 feet (5 meters) deep either from diving equipment failure or as a breath-hold diver returns to the surface. There are specific precautions and prevention strategies for this condition.

In an effort to be more clear and accurate, the American Red Cross and YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) do not use the term shallow water blackout. In our training programs and public education, our organizations use terminology that describes the dangerous behaviors that should be prevented—voluntary hyperventilation preceding underwater swimming and extended breath-holding. For simplicity, we refer to this condition as hypoxic blackout.

Lifeguards, instructors and coaches are trained to be alert and prevent swimmers attempting to hyperventilate and engage in extended breath-holding activities. Lifeguards are taught to respond quickly to any individual who is motionless in the water for any reason, including loss of consciousness. Swim instructors are also taught to limit participants to a single inhalation whenever they ask participants to hold their breath and submerge, and to set safety limits whenever setting up activities that involve underwater swimming. Being confident and comfortable underwater is an essential aquatic skill. Knowing what breath holding techniques are unsafe is important in exercising good judgment for safe skill practice and supervision of underwater aquatic activities.

###