Symbols of Safety: Beach Flags

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Enjoying a little fun in the sun on a summer's day can be effortless…especially when you add water! Whether you prefer a refreshing swim, a relaxing float in the Gulf, or a joyous romp in the surf, these delights of the season can be yours simply by heading to the beach and making your way right to the shoreline. Before jumping right in, though, it's good to know how to tell when it's an ideal time to get into the swim of things.

Although every beach in Florida has its own unique charm, one thing is a constant: the flags displayed on lifeguard stands or near the beach access entrances indicating water conditions are the same throughout the state. To promote greater public safety, the State of Florida adopted a uniform flag system in 2005, specifying the exact hues, sizes, and symbols to be used. Once you understand what each color signifies, knowing the water conditions is as easy as looking around to see which flags are flying in the breeze.

Double Red Flags: Water Closed to Public

When swimming is prohibited, two red flags—the top one solid in color and the bottom featuring the symbol of a swimmer with a white line through it—will indicate water conditions like severe impending weather or extreme rip currents that are too dangerous for even the strongest of swimmers. This combination of flags may also be displayed in areas near jetties or piers that are "no swim zones."

One Red Flag: High Hazard

A single red flag indicates serious hazards such as big waves, strong currents, or an approaching storm. In these conditions, all swimmers are discouraged from entering the water; those who choose to do so are advised to use extreme caution, particularly if they are weak swimmers or less experienced in the ocean.

Yellow Flag: Medium Hazard

A yellow flag means that moderate surf and currents are present such as choppy water with larger than average waves. On these days, experts advise exercising caution by swimming only near lifeguards, heeding all lifeguard warnings and wearing a life jacket, especially when swimming with children or if you are not a strong swimmer. Some beaches have a permanent yellow flag because of rocks, a sudden drop-off, or large populations of bait fish that attract predators.

Green Flags: Low Hazard

Just like with a stoplight, green means go! This flag signifies favorable, calm conditions, ideal for safe swimming and other water play. That being said, it's still wise to be alert to what's going on in your surroundings, to heed any warnings from the lifeguards, and to keep an eye on children.

Purple Flags: Dangerous Marine Life

Displayed on its own or in combination with one of the other flags, the purple flag indicates that potentially dangerous aquatic animals have been spotted in the area. When you see a purple flag but the water is not closed to swimming, you are allowed to partake in that activity; however, before you do, you may want to know what sort of creatures you could be sharing the water with to better evaluate your risk. Look around for signs posted near the water or visit the lifeguard station since the rescuers there typically note this information on the lifeguard communications board.

According to Sarasota County Parks and Recreation, jellyfish and stingrays are the most common potentially dangerous marine creatures encountered in this region. Since stingray mating season runs from April through October, it's wise to do the "stingray shuffle" when you enter the water during these warmer months. It's easy to do: just take a slow and steady approach as you step into the Gulf, sliding or shuffling your feet along the bottom surface as you walk. This action signals your presence to any neighboring stingrays, allowing them to safely swim out of your path.

In addition to checking the swimming condition flag before entering the water, Sarasota County Lifeguard Operations recommends a few other guidelines for beach swimming safety. First, realistically assess your swimming ability; if you aren't a strong swimmer, it is best to stay out of the water during more hazardous conditions. When you enter the water, never dive in headfirst or swim alone, always make an effort to swim in areas protected by a lifeguard, swim parallel to the shore, duck under breaking waves, and don't depend upon a flotation device to keep you safe in the water. For your safety, avoid the swim buoys, maintain a good distance from rock jetties, and if you are in trouble, call and wave for help. By following these tips, you can do your part to ensure that you and everyone in your party have a safe, fun day at the beach.