
Canoeing and kayaking - preventing injury

Summary

- Common canoeing and kayaking injury areas include the shoulder and wrist.
 - Always wear a helmet and life jacket.
 - Take lessons to improve your paddling and safety techniques.
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Canoeing and kayaking are outdoor activities that can be enjoyed by people of all ages and levels of fitness. Injuries can occur, however, if your skills and equipment are not sufficient for the type of paddling you plan to do. With preparation and common sense, you can avoid many potential paddling hazards.

Types of paddling activities

Canoeing and kayaking can include a wide range of activities such as paddling on rivers or lakes to enjoy the view, battling white water rapids or sea surf, sprint racing or competing in marathons. Competition and specialised activities, such as sea kayaking or white water canoeing, provides a more challenging experience and may require particular equipment, skills and experience.

Make sure your preparation and skills are adequate for the paddling activity you have planned. If you are interested in competing or just improving your technique, Canoeing Victoria offers a range of courses and workshops.

Types of canoeing and kayaking injuries

Some injuries associated with canoeing and kayaking include:

- Shoulder – the muscular force required to push the paddle through the water can cause an injury, such as a strain or sprain.

- Wrist – the repetitive motion of moving the paddle can, over time, lead to overuse injuries of the wrist joints.
- Impact injuries – for example, a person who has fallen into the water risks getting hit by the canoe or another object such as a floating log.
- Heat stress or dehydration – canoeing and kayaking are outdoor activities that often take place in summer or on open water, where shade is scarce and sun exposure can be extreme.
- Sunburn – overexposure to the sun can cause sunburn and skin damage. Reflected radiation from water can increase the levels of ultraviolet (UV) exposure for canoeists or kayakers.
- Hypothermia – falling into cold water when not wearing a wet suit can cause hypothermia, a dangerous and potentially fatal drop in body temperature.
- Drowning – while the risk of drowning is always present with any water-based activity, deaths from canoeing or kayaking activities are not common in Australia.

Risk factors for canoeing and kayaking

Some of the factors that can increase your risk of injury include:

- Inexperience – beginners may be more prone to injury because they do not have the skills or technique to meet the demands of the sport. For example, canoes or kayaks are tricky to steer and can tip over.
- Poor technique – holding or moving the body incorrectly can put unnecessary strain on joints, muscles and ligaments.
- Choosing an inappropriate waterway – accidents and injuries are more likely to happen if you attempt to canoe or kayak in a waterway that is beyond your skill level or for which you are ill-equipped. Seek local knowledge if paddling in a location for the first time, consider air and water temperature, currents, tides and wave action.
- Failure to wear protective equipment – life jackets, or personal flotation devices (PFD), and helmets are essential safety equipment. In Victoria, the law requires that life jackets are always worn when canoeing. Helmets should be worn when on or walking near moving water and rapids.
- Overtraining – training too much and too often can lead to a wide range of overuse injuries, particularly those of the wrist and shoulder.

Health and fitness suggestions for canoeing and kayaking

Suggestions include:

- Exercise regularly to keep yourself in good physical condition.
- Warm up thoroughly before activity. Include slow, sustained stretches.
- Cool down after activity. Stretching is also an important part of your cool-down routine.
- Drink plenty of water before, during and after activity.
- Dress for the conditions. A wet suit or thermal clothing can protect against the cold, while a loose, light-coloured, long-sleeved shirt and a hat provide protection against heat stress and sun exposure.
- Wear layers of clothing that you can remove one at a time when necessary.
- Be SunSmart. Protect your skin from ultraviolet (UV) radiation and sun damage. Wear a hat, suitable clothing and Australian Standard approved sunglasses. Apply 30+ (or higher) water-resistant sunscreen to all exposed areas of skin and reapply regularly.
- Don't go in the water if you've been drinking alcohol.

Develop skills when canoeing and kayaking

Always tell someone about your plans, including where you intend to canoe and when you expect to be back.

Others suggestions include:

- Don't canoe or kayak unless you are a competent swimmer.
- Don't canoe or kayak by yourself.
- Don't overestimate your skill or physical fitness. Choose a waterway that's not too difficult for you to manage.
- Take lessons on how to safely enter and exit the canoe at the shoreline.
- Take lessons to improve your paddling and safety techniques.

- If you fall into the water, stay with your craft. Keep a firm grip on your paddle.
- Resist the temptation to walk through relatively shallow water – your feet may get hooked on submerged objects. Always swim.
- Learn first aid to ensure you have the skills to deal with an emergency situation.

Check weather and conditions when canoeing and kayaking

Suggestions include:

- Check weather and conditions before you paddle – including marine or mountain weather forecasts, relevant river flow levels (for inland waters) and wind warnings (for lakes and ocean).
- Don't paddle in extreme conditions such as high winds, a large swell, extreme temperatures, fog or thunderstorms.
- Avoid heat stress by paddling early in the morning or late in the afternoon (particularly in summer) and using sun protection measures.
- Don't paddle at night unless you are experienced and only paddle where you have a clear vision of the route ahead.

Possible hazards when canoeing and kayaking

Suggestions include:

- Check out the waterway from land first, if you're paddling in a waterway for the first time.
- Look out for and avoid possible hazards such as overhanging or submerged tree branches, a high volume of water, unpredictable currents or a large swell, low water temperature, other craft, marine life or snakes.
- Talk to local canoeists or kayakers for information specific to the waterway you plan to paddle.

Using equipment for canoeing and kayaking

Suggestions include:

- Make sure your canoe or kayak is secured safely to the roof rack of your car when driving.
- Wear a helmet designed for canoeing, with sufficient drain holes to allow instant drainage.
- Wear a life jacket that is the correct size for you, even if you think you are a competent swimmer. It's not enough to carry one inside the canoe. If you're not wearing the life jacket, it will simply float away if you capsize.
- Use a paddle that's appropriate for your size, skill level and type of paddling activity.
- Consider fitting a whistle to your life jacket so you have a better chance of attracting attention if you need help.
- Never overload your canoe or kayak. Respect the load limits.
- Keep all equipment in good repair.

Treatment for canoeing and kayaking injuries

Suggestions on what to do if you injure yourself include:

- Stop immediately if an injury occurs to help prevent further damage.
- Seek prompt treatment of injury. Early management will mean less time away from paddling.
- Treat all soft tissue injuries (ligament sprains, muscle strains, bumps and bruises) with rest, ice, compression, elevation (raise the limb above your heart) and seek advice from a health professional.
- Treat sunburn or heat stress by moving to the shade. Avoid further sun exposure, drink plenty of water and seek medical assistance.
- Treat hypothermia by moving the person to somewhere warm and dry. Warm their body gradually with dry clothing and a thermal blanket. Provide warm drink and food with adequate calories.
- Do not resume activity until you have completely recovered from injury.

Where to get help

- Your doctor

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Physiotherapist
- Canoeing Victoria Tel. (03) 8846 4120
- Smartplay Tel. (03) 9674 8777

Things to remember

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- Always wear a helmet and life jacket.
- Take lessons to improve your paddling and safety techniques.

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