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Surf-related spinal injuries triple from last year

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Surf injuries this summer along the ocean coast are more than double the number recorded at Beebe Medical Center last summer. Spinal injuries are triple the number recorded last summer, causing beach patrols to prepare a safety plan for next summer. The stories of people getting cut or scraped or breaking bones and dislocating shoulders after being slammed by waves into a rock-and-shell-littered surf break area have been numerous this summer.

The stories of people bruising or fracturing spinal vertebrae have been less numerous but of far more concern to resort area beach patrols and health-care providers. Beebe Medical Center director of public relations Sharon Harmon said the total number of surf injuries treated at the local hospital as of Aug. 22 is 238, compared to 103 such injuries treated last summer.

Harmon said the total number of spinal injuries treated at the hospital as of Aug. 22 is 11, compared with the three spinal injuries treated last year.

A monthly breakdown of injuries shows that the vast majority of them – 223 cuts, scrapes and bone injuries and nine spinal injuries - occurred in July and August, after completion of the massive beach replenishment projects at both Rehoboth Beach and Dewey Beach. The projects greatly widened and raised the beaches, covering the jetties in Rehoboth Beach. And both projects resulted in sharp drops where the beach meets the ocean.

It is in that drop-off area that waves crash. And it is in that surf break zone that many people stand, waiting for a wave they can body surf or jump over. If they catch the wave, they are often pushed headfirst into the rock-littered shelf where they dislocate shoulders or fracture vertebrae. If they miss the wave, people are often slammed straight into the rocks and shells, where they get cut or scraped or break a bone.

Dr. Eric Gallagher, who has spent seven years working in Beebe Medical Center's emergency room, said he believes that most of the spinal injuries this year actually occurred south of the newly replenished beaches, in the area of the Delaware Seashore State Park beaches around Indian River Inlet and in north Bethany Beach.

Gallagher said most of the spinal injuries were minor in nature and required only a short time to heal. But he said he heard that one victim suffered a serious injury that left him with no ability to move his arms or legs.

“That was probably the man who was airlifted off Indian Beach in July,” said Dewey Beach Patrol Capt. Todd Fritchman. “I heard he was in real bad shape.” Fritchman said his lifeguards recognized in June that the surf break was the worst they’d seen.

“We definitely began telling visitors there should be no swimming in the surf break zone,” Fritchman said. “We can’t reach everybody on the beach, but we have tried to advise people who look like first-timers at the beach. Over the winter, we will form a better plan for next summer in case the beach doesn’t flatten out this winter.”

Rehoboth Beach Patrol Capt. Kent Buckson said his guards are already eyeing ways to protect swimmers next summer.

“We can’t do anything about the beach or the waves,” Buckson said. “But we can make signs for every beach access point in Rehoboth and have them up for next summer.” Buckson said that he, too, hopes the beach will flatten this winter and remove the hazard people have faced this summer.

“This was all uncharted water for us this year,” Buckson said. “We didn’t have time to guard the beach, respond to injuries and make signs this year, but we will during the winter.”

Buckson said there are some good positives from the beach projects. The jetties are mostly covered and not producing rip currents, he said. And the beachfront is very straight, giving guards a clear view of the water and other lifeguard stands.