Guidelines for Recreational Scuba Diver’s Physical Examination

Instructions to the Physician:

Recreational SCUBA (Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus) can provide recreational divers with an enjoyable sport safer than many other activities. The risk of diving is increased by certain physical conditions, which the relationship to diving may not be readily obvious. Thus, it is important to screen divers for such conditions.

The RECREATIONAL SCUBA DIVER’S PHYSICAL EXAMINATION focuses on conditions that may put a diver at increased risk for decompression sickness, pulmonary overinflation syndrome with subsequent arterial gas embolization and other conditions such as loss of consciousness, which could lead to drowning. Additionally, the diver must be able to withstand some degree of cold stress, the physiological effects of immersion and the optical effects of water and have sufficient physical and mental reserves to deal with possible emergencies.

The history, review of systems and physical examination should include as a minimum the points listed below. The list of conditions that might adversely affect the diver is not all-inclusive, but contains the most commonly encountered medical problems. The brief introductions should serve as an alert to the nature of the risk posed by each medical problem.

The potential diver and his or her physician must weigh the pleasures to be had by diving against an increased risk of death or injury due to the individual’s medical condition. As with any recreational activity, there are no data for diving enabling the calculation of an accurate mathematical probability of injury. Experience and physiological principles only permit a qualitative assessment of relative risk.

For the purposes of this document, Severe Risk implies that an individual is believed to be at substantially elevated risk of decompression sickness, pulmonary or otic barotrauma or altered consciousness with subsequent drowning, compared with the general population. The consultants involved in drafting this document would generally discourage a student with such medical problems from diving. Relative Risk refers to a moderate increase in risk, which in some instances may be acceptable. To make a decision as to whether diving is contraindicated for this category of medical problems, physicians must base their judgement on an assessment of the individual patient. Some medical problems which may preclude diving are temporary in nature or responsive to treatment, allowing the student to dive safely after they have resolved.

Diagnostic studies and specialty consultations should be obtained as indicated to determine the diver’s status. A list of references is included to aid in clarifying issues that arise. Physicians and other medical professionals of the Divers Alert Network (DAN) associated with Duke University Health System are available for consultation by phone +1 919 684 2948 during normal business hours. For emergency calls, 24 hours 7 days a week, call +1 919 684 8111 or +1 919 684 4DAN (collect). Related organizations exist in other parts of the world — DAN Europe in Italy +39 039 605 7858, DAN S.E.A.P. in Australia +61 3 9886 9166 and Divers Emergency Service (DES) in Australia +61 8 8212 9242, DAN Japan +81 33590 6501 and DAN Southern Africa +27 11 242 0380. There are also a number of informative websites offering similar advice.

NEUROLOGICAL

Neurological abnormalities affecting a diver’s ability to perform exercise should be assessed according to the degree of compromise. Some diving physicians feel that conditions in which there can be a waxing and waning of neurological symptoms and signs, such as migraine or demyelinating disease, contraindicate diving because an exacerbation or attack of the preexisting disease (e.g.: a migraine with aura) may be difficult to distinguish from neurological decompression sickness. A history of head injury resulting in unconsciousness should be evaluated for risk of seizure.

Relative Risk Conditions

- Complicated Migraine Headaches whose symptoms or severity impair motor or cognitive function, neurologic manifestations
- History of Head Injury with sequelae other than seizure
- Herniated Nucleus Pulposus
- Intracranial Tumor or Aneurysm
- Peripheral Neuropathy
- Multiple Sclerosis
- Trigeminal Neuralgia
- History of spinal cord or brain injury

Temporary Risk Condition

History of cerebral gas embolism without residual where pulmonary air trapping has been excluded and for which there is a satisfactory explanation and some reason to believe that the probability of recurrence is low.

Severe Risk Conditions

Any abnormalities where there is a significant probability of unconsciousness, hence putting the diver at increased risk of drowning. Divers with spinal cord or brain abnormalities where perfusion is impaired may be at increased risk of decompression sickness.

Some conditions are as follows:

- History of seizures other than childhood febrile seizures
- History of Transient Ischemic Attack (TIA) or Cerebrovascular Accident (CVA)
- History of Serious (Central Nervous System, Cerebral or Inner Ear) Decompression Sickness with residual deficits

CARDIOVASCULAR SYSTEMS

Relative Risk Conditions

The diagnoses listed below potentially render the diver unable to meet the exertional performance requirements likely to be encountered in recreational diving. These conditions may lead the diver to experience cardiac ischemia and its consequences. Formalized stress testing is encouraged if there is any doubt regarding physical performance capability. The suggested minimum criteria for stress testing in such cases is at least 13 METS.* Failure to meet the exercise criteria would be of significant concern. Conditioning and retesting may make later qualification possible. Immersion in water causes a redistribution of blood from the periphery into the central compartment, an effect that is greatest in cold water. The marked increase in cardiac preload during immersion can precipitate pulmonary edema in patients with impaired left ventricular function or significant valvular disease. The effects of immersion can mostly be gauged by an assessment of the diver’s performance while swimming on the surface. A large proportion of scuba diving deaths in North America are due to coronary artery disease. Before being approved to scuba dive, individuals older than 40 years are recommended to undergo risk assessment for coronary artery disease. Formal exercise testing may be needed to assess the risk.

* METS is a term used to describe the metabolic cost. The MET at rest is one, two METS is two times the resting level, three METS is three times the resting level, and so on. The resting energy cost (net oxygen requirement) is thus standardized. (Exercise Physiology; Clark, Prentice Hall, 1975.)
Relative Risk Conditions

- History of Coronary Artery Bypass Grafting (CABG)
- Percutaneous Balloon Angioplasty (PCTA) or Coronary Artery Disease (CAD)
- History of Myocardial Infarction
- Hypertension
- History of dysrhythmias requiring medication for suppression
- Valvular Regurgitation

Pacemakers

The pathologic process that necessitated should be addressed regarding the diver’s fitness to dive. In those instances where the problem necessitating pacing does not preclude diving, will the diver be able to meet the performance criteria?

* NOTE: Pacemakers must be certified by the manufacturer as able to withstand the pressure changes involved in recreational diving.

Severe Risks

Venous emboli, commonly produced during decompression, may cross major intracardiac right-to-left shunts and enter the cerebral or spinal cord circulations causing neurological decompression illness. Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy and valvular stenosis may lead to the sudden onset of unconsciousness during exercise.

PULMONARY

Any process or lesion that impedes airflow from the lungs places the diver at risk for pulmonary overinflation with alveolar rupture and the possibility of cerebral air embolization. Many interstitial diseases predispose to spontaneous pneumothorax: Asthma (reactive airway disease), Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), cystic or cavitating lung diseases may all cause air trapping. The 1996 Undersea and Hyperbaric Medical Society (UHMS) consensus on diving and asthma indicates that for the risk of pulmonary barotrauma and decompression illness to be acceptably low, the asthmatic diver should be asymptomatic and have normal spirometry before and after an exercise test. Inhalation challenge tests (e.g.: using histamine, hypertonic saline or methacholine) are not sufficiently standardized to be interpreted in the context of scuba diving.

A pneumothorax that occurs or reoccurs while diving may be catastrophic. As the diver ascends, air trapped in the cavity expands and could produce a tension pneumothorax.

In addition to the risk of pulmonary barotrauma, respiratory disease due to either structural disorders of the lung or chest wall or neuromuscular disease may impair exercise performance. Structural disorders of the chest or abdominal wall (e.g.: prune belly), or neuromuscular disorders, may impair cough, which could be life threatening if water is aspirated. Respiratory limitation due to disease is compounded by the combined effects of immersion (causing a restrictive deficit) and the increase in gas density, which increases in proportion to the ambient pressure (causing increased airway resistance). Formal exercise testing may be helpful.

Relative Risk Conditions

- History of Asthma or Reactive Airway Disease (RAD)*
- History of Exercise Induced Bronchospasm (EIB)*
- History of solid, cystic or cavitating lesion*
- Pneumothorax secondary to:
  - Thoracic Surgery
  - Trauma or Pleural Penetration*
  - Previous Overinflation Injury*
- Obesity
- History of Immersion Pulmonary Edema Restrictive Disease*
- Interstitial lung disease: May increase the risk of pneumothorax

* Spirometry should be normal before and after exercise

Active Reactive Airway Disease, Active Asthma, Exercise Induced Bronchospasm, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease or history of same with abnormal PFTs or a positive exercise challenge are concerns for diving.

Severe Risk Conditions

- History of spontaneous pneumothorax. Individuals who have experienced spontaneous pneumothorax should avoid diving, even after a surgical procedure designed to prevent recurrence (such as pleurodesis). Surgical procedures either do not correct the underlying lung abnormality (e.g.: pleurodesis, apical pleurectomy) or may not totally correct it (e.g.: resection of blebs or bullae).
- Impaired exercise performance due to respiratory disease.

GASTROINTESTINAL

Temporary Risks

As with other organ systems and disease states, a process which chronically debilitates the diver may impair exercise performance. Additionally, dive activities may take place in areas remote from medical care. The possibility of acute recurrences of disability or lethal symptoms must be considered.

Temporary Risk Conditions

- Peptic Ulcer Disease associated with pyloric obstruction or severe reflux
- Unrepaired hernias of the abdominal wall large enough to contain bowel within the hernia sac could incarcerate.

Relative Risk Conditions

- Inflammatory Bowel Disease
- Functional Bowel Disorders

Severe Risks

Altered anatomical relationships secondary to surgery or malformations that lead to gas trapping may cause serious problems. Gas trapped in a hollow viscous expands as the divers surfaces and can lead to rupture or, in the case of the upper GI tract, emesis. Emesis underwater may lead to drowning.

Severe Risk Conditions

- Gastric outlet obstruction of a degree sufficient to produce recurrent vomiting
- Chronic or recurrent small bowel obstruction
- Severe gastroesophageal reflux
- Achalasia
- Paraesophageal Hernia

ORTHOPAEDIC

Relative impairment of mobility, particularly in a boat or ashore with equipment weighing up to 18 kgs/40 pounds must be assessed. Orthopaedic conditions of a degree sufficient to impair exercise performance may increase the risk.

Relative Risk Conditions

- Amputation
- Scoliosis must also assess impact on respiratory function and exercise performance.
- Aseptic Necrosis possible risk of progression due to effects of decompression (evaluate the underlying medical
cause of decompression may accelerate/escalate the pro-

**Temporary Risk Conditions**
- Back pain

**HEMATOLOGICAL**
Abnormalities resulting in altered rheological properties may the-
oretically increase the risk of decompression sickness. Bleeding

disorders could worsen the effects of otic or sinus barotrauma,
and exacerbate the injury associated with inner ear or spinal cord
decompression sickness. Spontaneous bleeding into the joints
(e.g.: in hemophilia) may be difficult to distinguish from decom-
pression illness.

**Relative Risk Conditions**
- Sickle Cell Disease
- Polycythemia Vera
- Leukemia
- Hemophilia/Impaired Coagulation

**METABOLIC AND ENDOCRINOLOGICAL**
With the exception of diabetes mellitus, states of altered hormon-
al or metabolic function should be assessed according to their
impact on the individual’s ability to tolerate the moderate exercise
requirement and environmental stress of sport diving. Obesity
may predispose the individual to decompression sickness, can
impair exercise tolerance and is a risk factor for coronary artery
disease.

**Relative Risk Conditions**
- Hormonal Excess or Deficiency
- Obesity
- Renal Insufficiency

**Severe Risk Conditions**
The potentially rapid change in level of consciousness asso-
ciated with hypoglycemia in diabetics on insulin therapy or

certain oral hypoglycemic medications can result in drown-
ing. Diving is therefore generally contraindicated, unless
associated with a specialized program that addresses these
issues.

Pregnancy: The effect of venous emboli formed during
decompression on the fetus has not been thoroughly inves-
tigated. Diving is therefore not recommended during any
stage of pregnancy or for women actively seeking to
become pregnant.

**BEHAVIORAL HEALTH**
Behavioral: The diver’s mental capacity and emotional make-up
are important to safe diving. The student diver must have suffi-
cient learning abilities to grasp information presented to him by
his instructors, be able to safely plan and execute his own dives
and react to changes around him in the underwater environment.
The student’s motivation to learn and his ability to deal with
potentially dangerous situations are also crucial to safe scuba
diving.

**Relative Risk Conditions**
- Developmental delay
- History of drug or alcohol abuse
- History of previous psychotic episodes
- Use of psychotropic medications

**Severe Risk Conditions**
- Inappropriate motivation to dive – solely to please spouse,
  partner or family member, to prove oneself in the face of
  personal fears
- Claustrophobia and agoraphobia
- Active psychosis
- History of untreated panic disorder
- Drug or alcohol abuse

**OTOLARYNGOLOGICAL**
Equalisation of pressure must take place during ascent and
descent between ambient water pressure and the external audi-
tory canal, middle ear and paranasal sinuses. Failure of this to
occur results at least in pain and in the worst case rupture of the
occluded space with disabling and possible lethal consequences.

The inner ear is fluid filled and therefore noncompressible. The
flexible interfaces between the middle and inner ear, the round
and oval windows are, however, subject to pressure changes.
Previously ruptured but healed round or oval window membranes
are at increased risk of rupture due to failure to equalise pressure
or due to marked overpressurisation during vigorous or explosive
Valsalva manoeuvres.

The larynx and pharynx must be free of an obstruction to airflow.
The laryngeal and epiglottic structure must function normally to
prevent aspiration.

Mandibular and maxillary function must be capable of allowing
the patient to hold a scuba mouthpiece. Individuals who have
had mid-face fractures may be prone to barotrauma and rupture
of the air filled cavities involved.

**Relative Risk Conditions**
- Recurrent otitis externa
- Significant obstruction of external auditory canal
- History of significant cold injury to pinna
- Eustachian tube dysfunction
- Recurrent otitis media or sinusitis
- History of TM perforation
- History of tymanoplasty
- History of mastoidectomy
- Significant conductive or sensorineural hearing impair-
  ment
- Facial nerve paralysis not associated with barotrauma
- Full prosthetodontic devices
- History of mid-face fracture
- Unhealed oral surgery sites
- History of head and/or neck therapeutic radiation
- History of temperomandibular joint dysfunction
- History of round window rupture

**Severe Risk Conditions**
- Monomeric TM
- Open TM perforation
- Tube myringotomy
- History of stapedectomy
- History of ossicular chain surgery
- History of inner ear surgery
- Facial nerve paralysis secondary to barotrauma
- Inner ear disease other than presbycusis
- Uncorrected upper airway obstruction
- Laryngectomy or status post partial laryngectomy
- Tracheostomy
- Uncorrected laryngoecele
- History of vestibular decompression sickness
BIBLIOGRAPHY/REFERENCE


ENDORSERS

Paul A. Thombs, M.D., Medical Director
Hyperbaric Medical Center
St. Luke's Hospital, Denver, CO, USA

Peter Bennett, Ph.D., D.Sc.
Professor, Anesthesiology
Duke University Medical Center
Durham, NC, USA
pbennett@dan.duke.edu

Richard E. Moon, M.D., F.A.C.P., F.C.C.P.
Departments of Anesthesiology and Pulmonary Medicine
Duke University Medical Center
Durham, NC, USA

Roy A. Myers, M.D.
MIEMS
Baltimore, MD, USA

William Clem, M.D., Hyperbaric Consultant
Division Presbyterian/St. Luke’s Medical Center
Denver, CO, USA

John M. Alexander, M.D.
Northridge Hospital
Los Angeles, CA, USA

Des Gorman, B.Sc., M.B.Ch.B., F.A.C.O.M., F.A.F.O.M., Ph.D.
Professor of Medicine
University of Auckland, Auckland, NZ
d.gorman@auckland.ac.nz

All O. Brubakk, M.D., Ph.D.
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Trondheim, Norway
alfb@medisin.ntnu.no

Alessandro Marroni, M.D.
Director, DAN Europe
Roseto, Italy
Hugh Greer, M.D.
Santa Barbara, CA, USA
hdgbigfp@aol.com


Chris Edge, M.A., Ph.D., M.B.B.S., A.F.O.M., Nuffield Department of Anaesthetics Radcliffe Infirmary Oxford, United Kingdom cjedge@diver.demon.co.uk

Richard Vann, Ph.D.
Duke University Medical Center
Durham, NC, USA

Keith Van Meter, M.D., F.A.C.E.P.
Assistant Clinical Professor of Surgery Tulane University School of Medicine New Orleans, LA, USA

Robert W. Goldmann, M.D.
St. Luke’s Hospital Milwaukee, WI, USA

Paul G. Linaweaver, M.D., F.A.C.P.
Santa Barbara Medical Clinic Undersea Medical Specialist Santa Barbara, CA, USA

James Vorosmarti, M.D.
6 Orchard Way South Rockville, MD, USA

Tom S. Neuman, M.D., F.A.C.P., F.A.C.P.M.
Associate Director, Emergency Medical Services Professor of Medicine and Surgery University of California at San Diego San Diego, CA, USA

Yoshihiro Mano, M.D.
Professor Tokyo Medical and Dental University Tokyo, Japan y mano.rs@tmd.ac.jp

Simon Mitchell, MB.Ch.B., DipDHM, Ph.D.
Westley Centre for Hyperbaric Medicine Medical Director Sandford Jackson Bldg., 30 Chasely Street Auchenflower, QLD 4066 Australia

Jan Risberg, M.D., Ph.D.
NUI, Norway

Karen B.Van Hoesen, M.D.
Associate Clinical Professor UCSD Diving Medicine Center University of California at San Diego San Diego, CA, USA

Edmond Kay, M.D., F.A.A.F.P.
Dive Physician & Asst. Clinical Prof. of Family Medicine University of Washington Seattle, WA, USA

Christopher W. Dueker, TWS, M.D.
Atherton, CA, USA

Charles E. Lehner, Ph.D.
Department of Surgical Sciences University of Wisconsin Madison, WI, USA

Undersea & Hyperbaric Medical Society 10531 Metropolitan Avenue Kensington, MD 20895, USA

Diver’s Alert Network (DAN) 6 West Colony Place Durham, NC 27705

Divers Alert Network S.E.A.P., P. O. Box 384, Ashburton, Australia, telephone 61-3-9866-9166


South Pacific Underwater Medicine Society (SPUMS), P.O. Box 190, Red Hill South, Victoria, Australia, www.spums.org.au

European Underwater and Baromedical Society, www.eubs.org


10. Undersea and Hyperbaric Medical Society (UHMS)

www.UHMS.org

11. Divers Alert Network (DAN) United States, 6 West Colony Place, Durham, NC. www.DiversAlertNetwork.org

12. Divers Alert Network Europe, P.O. Box 64026 Roseto, Italy, telephone non-emergency line: weekdays office hours +39-085-893-0333, emergency line 24 hours: +39-039-605-7858

13. Divers Alert Network S.E.A.P., P. O. Box 384, Ashburton, Australia, telephone 61-3-9866-9166


15. South Pacific Underwater Medicine Society (SPUMS), P.O. Box 190, Red Hill South, Victoria, Australia, www.spums.org.au