

One Strike and You're Out

Written by: Patrice Hampson, M.Ed. ©2003
Peterborough Fire/Rescue

A crowd is assembled at an outdoor event and there's much excitement in the air. It's the bottom of the fourth inning of a championship Little League game and everyone is cheering the next player going up to bat. In the distance, ominous looking clouds are fast approaching. The pitcher winds up and throws a wild pitch. Ball one. A low growl of thunder reverberates and mixes with the cheers of the crowd. As the winds pick up and the clouds thicken, a few weary observers gather their belongings and head towards their cars. Feeling the pressure to beat the storm, the pitcher rushes and hurls yet another wild ball. Ball two. The coaches gaze up at the clouds with furrowed brows, wondering if the rain will hold off for a just a few more minutes. They've got a decision to make; call the game or play on. Parents approach them with varying opinions. "Get the kids off the field!" or "It's not raining yet, play ball!"

Most of us have been in a similar situation where we've worn that same, dumbfounded look of indecision. Whether swimming at Cunningham Pond, walking the course at Monadnock Country Club or swinging a bat at Adams Playground, the same safety procedures apply and this is the perfect time to go over them since June 22-28th is Lightning Awareness Week.

As in the aforementioned scenario, strong winds and cloud cover are signs of impending lightning storms, yet many casualties occur when these early threats are ignored. Did you know that the deadliest lightning strikes occur before the start of and as much as thirty minutes after a storm has passed? My PFR colleague and meteorologist by profession Becky Stanley explains it this way: "90% of lightning strokes are of the shorter, negatively charged variety. They often occur while it's raining when people have already run for cover. The other 10% of lightning strokes are positively charged and mostly occur outside of the rain area, usually surprising people. These deadly lightning strokes span a greater distance to reach the ground and are about 10 times stronger as well!" Also, according to the National Weather Service, many lightning deaths occur because people wait until the last minute before seeking safe shelter or venture out too soon after a storm has passed.

Now that you understand how important it is to remove yourself from harm's way before and at least 30 minutes after a storm, exactly what is considered to be a safe shelter? Large enclosed buildings are the ideal though a hard-top vehicle with closed windows also offers some protection. A structure that does not contain plumbing or wiring throughout or some other mechanism for grounding from the roof to the ground is not safe. These include: sheds, picnic shelters, carports, unprotected gazebos and baseball dugouts.

If we are in our homes, most of us know to stay out of the bath or shower. But did you know that phone usage is the leading cause of lightning injuries indoors? Lightning can travel long distances in both telephone and electrical wires, especially in rural areas. And as much as we are awed by the grandeur of lightning bolts, it's best to stay away from metal doors or window frames that can act as potential conductive surfaces.

There have been times when fast approaching storms have caught several Peterborough residents off guard while swimming and boating at Cunningham Pond. While a few families opted to make a run for the shelter of their cars, others selected to stand under the partial overhang of the beach house. The latter is not a safe place! If you do find yourself caught in a boat and unable to make it to shore, crouch down in the center of the boat until the threat has passed.

If you happen to be hiking on a mountain trail and cannot get to a safe haven, get below tree line and into a grove of small trees. Stay away from tall, isolated trees as you don't want to be near the tallest object during a lightning storm. Leave your metal-frame backpacks or hardware a safe distance away since they can conduct lightning.

Let's say you're playing golf in a wide open space and a storm moves in quickly while you're still trying to make it to shelter. Drop your clubs and move a distance away from them since they are conductors of lightning. If lightning is about to strike, it sometimes will give you a few seconds notice. Your skin might

tingle, light metal objects could vibrate or your hair may stand on end. You may also hear a crackling sound. Quickly get into the crouch position. Put your feet together, squat down, tuck your head and cover your ears. Why? This position will make your body as low to the ground as possible and at the same time, provide the smallest amount of physical surface contact with the earth. Avoid huddling in a crowd and maintain several yards distance from others in your golfing group. When the immediate threat of lightning has passed, continue heading towards shelter.

If someone has been struck by lightning, call 911. Victims carry no electrical charge that can shock other people and they can be examined and treated without risk.

After a cold, snowy winter and a long, wet spring, so many of us are looking forward to summer and it's associated outdoor amusements like concerts, barbeques, and deep sea fishing trips. Picnics, pool parties, weddings and baseball games. But unlike the game of baseball, lightning storms do not have a predetermined strike zone. And with just one strike, you could be out.

I hope you have learned something new this week, and there is more lightning safety information available through the Peterborough Fire/Rescue website (www.firerescue.us). Feel free to further educate yourself by reading the numerous articles provided. As always, Peterborough Fire/Rescue welcomes the public to call 924-8090 with regards to any safety concerns. Emergencies, call 911.