

MEDICAL PROBLEMS PEOPLE CAN DIVE WITH

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As an instructor, I'm sure you have been approached by potential students who want to learn to dive, but who have a medical problem marked on their physical form. What do you do? You probably aren't familiar with some or most of the medical terms used on the standard associations' forms. So you tell them to see a doctor and, usually the doctor, knowing little of the effects diving will have on the patient and being cautious, will not clear the student. Now you've contributed to preventing a person from enjoying the underwater environment and you have also lost a student.

Well, then, who should or should not dive? Can everybody dive? There are several definite absolute contra-indications to diving:

- 1) Persons subject to spontaneous pneumothorax;
- 2) Persons subject to epileptic seizures or syncopal attacks;
- 3) Persons with lung cysts; emphysema; or air trapping lesions on chest x-rays;
- 4) Persons with a ruptured ear drum with a permanent hole;
- 5) Persons subject to active acute asthma attacks;
- 6) Persons addicted to drugs of any kind;
- 7) Persons with brittle diabetes if the individual is or has been subject to insulin shock or diabetic coma;
- 8) Persons who have had ear surgery with placement of a plastic strut in the air conduction chain.

If a person has any of the above, they should not dive. But most people with medical problems don't fit the categories above. In my experience as a physician in the diving community, as well as a diving instructor, several areas of medical problems often crop up.

A more common problem I am presented with is a person who has a learning disability. There are many different types of learning problems, but I have found this problem rather easy to handle. First, as an instructor, you must sit down, take some time with the student, and find out where their understanding breaks down. Usually the student will know that he will have trouble understanding your notes or understanding your oral teaching or writing down his own notes fast enough. Whatever type of problem they have, you



can usually find an easy way to circumvent it. For example, if they have trouble keeping up with notes, give them tapes of your lectures to study at home. Usually, I have found these students very enthusiastic and they do very well, pass the written exam, and make excellent divers. The key to solving the learning disability problem is taking extra time. If you are willing, the rewards are great. A good side effect of teaching a disabled person is that you have a chance

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to assess your teaching ability. It can be a very interesting. My experience includes hypertensive patients, many allergic-type problems, and others, even including a renal transplant patient on several toxic medicines. Probably more important to a person's success or failure in a diving class than the medical problem is their physical condition. If they are prepared for the course, knowing the required physical activity then the student usually succeeds.

Often I will be called concerning the student who has been disqualified from the diving class by a doctor, who says they are "too old" to dive. Sometimes there may be a medical problem related to age that may prevent a person from diving, but just being old is not a reason. Having taught several people in their 60's to dive, I have found they are sometimes better than students half their age. Here again, major reasons for their success were enthusiasm, physical fitness, and an awareness of their limitations. And you, the instructor, are an integral part of each one of those three areas.

Finally, I would like to discuss the problems associated with physical disabilities, including amputees, paraplegics, and cerebral palsy patients. Can these people dive? In this case, the answer is yes they can dive. However, to become successful divers, they will take lots of instructional time and patience, sometimes on a private or semi-private level. Some instructors may not want to tackle this type of student, but in my experience, these students are the most satisfying to teach. In the water, many can overcome most of their on-land problems. They can find a new freedom. It can be truly exciting. Care must be taken here concerning whether these students may receive full certification. Remember, they may be required to save a buddy or get a person who is in trouble back to shore.

There are many individual problems that may come up that aren't possible to specifically discuss here. Usually most people who are interested in diving and have some idea of the energy output needed in this sport, can become certified. Mostly, it comes down to our attitude toward medical problems as instructors. The solution can be found in our interest in the student, expending a little extra encouragement and time. But the pay-off is that these will be some of the best and most grateful students you will ever teach.

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