Backboarding 101: A Quick Reference Guide

American Red Cross

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Introduction

Backboarding is one of the most important aspects of lifeguarding. Many patrons at the pool do not follow the rules and risk injury. Slippery tiles, shallow pools, rock features, unsafe behavior and unforeseen injuries can all be the causes of a lifeguard having to employ a backboard save. Using a backboard may seem simple, but one small mistake and the lifeguard can risk not only further injury but also the life of a patron.

Learning to backboard while in your Red Cross Lifeguard Certification Course will be one of the toughest parts of the training. However, after you are done you will have a skill that can save lives in ways many don’t know how.

This guide will assist in your employment as a lifeguard. Reviewing an important skill as backboarding can be the difference in your job and the safety of patrons at your pool.
Chapter 1
Materials

- Oxygen Tank
- Backboard
- AED (Automated External Defibrillator)
- Straps
- Head Immobilizer
- Whistle
EAP (Emergency Action Plan)

Every pool facility should have an EAP. This plan will make the difference in the speed of your backboard save. Depending on the size of the pool facility, there should be a number of guards doing different steps in the plan. Below are the different duties of the guards in a proper EAP.

- Guard administering the head arm splint technique
- Guard retrieving the backboard to begin the process
- Guard removing all patrons from the pool area
- Guard retrieving the oxygen tank and AED
- Guard calling 911
Backboarding

You spot a victim

Always remember to blow the triple whistle to activate the facilities EAP. Once the whistle has been blown, be sure to enter the pool softly and not cause ripples. These ripples can cause extra injury to a victim. After entering the water, approach the side of the victim by walking and apply the head/arm splint technique. With the victim in this position, you should be talking to them and keeping their mouth from swallowing any water by moving at a quick pace in the pool.
Help Arrives

Upon seeing the second lifeguard arrive with the backboard, you can begin to walk near the side of the pool to shorten the time the help takes getting to you. Once the second guard is in position to push the backboard underneath your victim, move your victim in a ready position (see below).

Stabilize the victims head and back by placing one hand on the chin and one below the backboard right under the upper back. Once the victim is stabilized, place the guard tube underneath the board below the feet to lift the victim’s legs up.
Help arrives

Now, with your victim in a stabilized, floating position on the backboard move towards the wall so that you can be flush with the wall. Once your back is against the side wall of the pool, place your hands over the ears of the victim so that you have a firm hold on them. This position is to prevent any further neck or spinal injury while your partner is applying the straps.
Applying the Straps

Application of the straps is a requirement of the second lifeguard. With the victim in a position against the wall, movement in the water is not a problem. Always begin with applying the straps from top to bottom.

Start at the top of the victim and move one end of the first strap over the chest. Next, move the second strap over the abdomen area the victim. Next, move the third strap over the victim’s legs. Repeat these steps from the other side of the victim while also attaching the straps to secure the victim. NEVER reach over a victim in fear of bumping them off the board.

All straps should be secured under the 2 finger rule. Place two fingers under the straps and if there is no more room between the straps and the victim’s body then the victim is secure enough. This is to ensure that the victim will not fall from the board when being pulled out.
Applying the Head Immobilizer

The head immobilizer is the last step in the securing of your victim on the backboard. While it seems like the easiest, it also is the most dangerous. When applying the immobilizer it is important to have great communication with your partner. Applying the immobilizer too early or too late can make the difference in an extra neck injury. Safe measure is to countdown from 3 and once reaching “Go” pressing down quickly but firmly to the board with immobilizer. The first lifeguard, the one holding the victims head stabilized, should return the hand to the side of the head once the immobilizer is in place.

After the head immobilizer is in place and the primary lifeguard is holding the blocks against the ears of the victim, the secondary lifeguard can begin to apply the straps to the head immobilizer. Same as the straps for the body, you must begin at the top and move down. Each backboard should have two straps for each head immobilizer.

Remember, apply the straps from each side of the body, never reach over.
Pulling the Victim out of the Water

With all the straps applied and the victim in a stabilized position, it is now time to pull him or her out of the water and onto safety. The secondary lifeguard will be the first to remove themselves from the pool. Once out of the water, the secondary lifeguard will grab the top of the backboard with both hands and keep the board stabilized while the primary guard removes themselves. Now that both guards are out of the water and have hands on the backboard, it is a simple lift and pull technique that must be used. See the picture below to have a visual aid on this technique.
Deep Water Differences

Now that you know how to backboard in the shallow water, deep water will be a breeze. The main differences between shallow and deep water backboarding are treading water and extra tube application.

All steps are the same in backboarding a spinal victim. However, when applying the backboard, the secondary lifeguard must apply two tubes below the backboard. One below the feet, as usual, and an extra below the head region. This extra tube application helps the primary lifeguard stabilize the victim better.

Treading water is a technique that comes with endurance and practice. Deep water backboarding can be very simple if you just practice shallow water until its second nature.
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