

Recent shark attacks are worrying beachgoers, yet experts say they're very rare

May 23 2023, by Patrick Whittle



A white shark swims across a sand bar off the Massachusetts' coast of Cape Cod, Aug. 13, 2021. Recent shark bites in Florida and Hawaii and a suspected case in New Jersey have peaked interest in the age-old summer question of whether it's safe to go in the water. Credit: AP Photo/Charles Krupa, File

Recent [shark bites in Florida](#) and Hawaii and a suspected case in New

Jersey have piqued interest in an age-old summer question for beachgoers—is it safe to go in the water?

Scientists and researchers who study sharks said the overwhelming answer to that question is yes, it is safe. Potentially dangerous interactions between humans and sharks are uncommon, and serious injuries and deaths from the bites are vanishingly rare, scientists said.

Nonetheless, the dramatic nature of shark bites and the stories of survivors, such as Hawaii surfer Mike Morita's tale of fighting off a shark in April, capture the imagination. It's a good idea to remember just how rare shark bites truly are, scientists said.

How often do shark bites occur?

There have been typically around 70 to 80 unprovoked shark bites annually, worldwide, over the past decade. And not only are shark bites rare, they've been especially rare recently.

There were only 57 unprovoked bites last year, and five of those were fatal, according to University of Florida's International Shark Attack File. There had been nine such deaths the previous year.

The shark attack file reported a year ago that one reason for the decline in bites might be the global decline of shark populations.

It's too early in the warm season to get an idea of how active this year will be for interactions between humans and sharks, said Greg Skomal, a shark expert with the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries.

"If we get lots of bait fish and forage fish species close to shore, we have a super hot summer that draws people to beaches, more people in the water, then we can determine the risk," Skomal said.



In this May, 22, 2019, file photo, a woman walks with her dogs at Newcomb Hollow Beach in Wellfleet, Mass., where a boogie boarder was bitten by a shark in 2018 and later died of his injuries. Recent shark bites in Florida and Hawaii and a suspected case in New Jersey have peaked interest in the age-old summer question of whether it's safe to go in the water. Credit: AP Photo/Charles Krupa, File

What are the most prone areas for shark encounters?

The United States and Australia are typically the sites of the most reported shark bites. Florida had more bites than anywhere else on Earth last year with 16 unprovoked bites, two of which resulted in amputations, the shark attack file said.

This month, two Florida fishermen were [bitten by sharks](#) in separate

incidents less than 36 hours apart.

The rate of shark bites has stayed steady in recent years, but it might feel like a more common occurrence because of the prevalence of smartphones, said Nick Whitney, a senior scientist at the New England Aquarium in Boston. Recently developed smartphone apps allow users to report shark sightings in real time.

What kind of sharks are cause for concern?

White sharks, bull sharks and tiger sharks are the sharks most cited by the International Shark Attack File for unprovoked bites. Those species are large sharks that also cause the most fatalities.

However, it's worth bearing in mind that many interactions with sharks are with smaller species that are unlikely to cause serious injuries, said James Sulikowski, director of the Coastal Oregon Marine Experiment Station at Oregon State University. Those species might bite a human, realize we are not their preferred prey and move on, he said.

Is it safe to swim?

Yes. You're at exponentially greater risk of getting hurt in a car accident on the way to the beach than you are to get seriously injured by a shark bite.

Millions of people flock to the beach in the summer as the weather heats up, and that raises the possibility of interacting with a shark. But by taking simple precautions, such as not carrying shiny objects into the water and not swimming at dawn and dusk, beachgoers can reduce any chance of a dangerous encounter with a shark, Sulikowski said.

"We are intruders in their environment. What we can do is be logical and safe about that and avoid areas where sharks are going to be feeding," Sulikowski said. "When an interaction occurs, it's mistaken identity—we are in an area where a shark is looking to eat."

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