Diving on Medications

Let your dive instructor know if you are taking any medications, whether they're prescribed by your doctor or purchased over the counter. Most medications will have no effect on diving, but some may cause drowsiness or fatigue, which may increase the susceptibility to nitrogen narcosis. Others may affect heart rate. Read the warning labels and precautions before using prescription or over-the-counter drugs, especially if you plan to dive.

The susceptibility of an unexpected reaction to medications at depth varies from diver to diver, and even from day to day. If you start a new medication, be sure there are no side effects at the surface before entering the water. (This is especially true of anti-motion sickness medications.) If a medication "may cause drowsiness" or suggests restricting the use of machinery after taking the medication, it may be best to reconsider your plan to dive and wait until you're no longer taking that medication.

Asthma and Diabetes

There is concern about the advisability of allowing individuals with asthma or insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus to dive.

Some individuals with a history of asthma are permitted to dive by their physicians — after a careful evaluation. Diabetes and many other medical conditions must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis with an appropriate medical specialist.

DAN continues to research the safety of scuba diving for individuals with underlying health problems. Your DAN membership helps support these studies.

Enjoy Scuba!

Scuba diving is an activity that anyone with good health and fitness can enjoy for a lifetime. To get the most out of your lifetime of diving, practice disease and injury prevention and participate in a health maintenance program.

- See your physician for regular checkups in addition to when you're ill;
- Participate in a regular exercise program;
- Be rested and well-nourished before diving;
- Use proper exposure protection and equipment;
- Plan your dive to avoid overexertion.

Most of all, don't hide or downplay any medical condition or health problem. It's better to have an open and frank discussion before a problem arises than to wonder if the injury could have been avoided.

Finally, if you have questions on your own diving fitness, queries about certain medical conditions when diving, how to find a diving doctor in your area, or if your physician has any questions, call DAN's Medical Information Line at (919) 684-2948 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. ET.

DAN is Your Dive Safety Association

Pick up a DAN Membership application now!
Or join by calling 800-446-2671

Divers Alert Network
3100 Tower Boulevard, Suite 1300
Durham, NC 27707-2563
(919) 684-2948 • Fax (919) 490-6630

DAN Alert Network
Your Dive Safety Association
http://www.dan.org
Personal Fitness in Scuba Diving

Scuba diving offers opportunities for travel, family fun and friendly interaction with the environment. As divers of all ages and athletic abilities pursue recreational diving, one must consider the fitness level required for scuba. Although the relatively weightless underwater environment makes diving appear almost effortless, scuba diving does require a measure of strength and stamina.

In this brochure, DAN explains why overall fitness is important to a diver, when you may need to postpone diving based on medical conditions, the need for a physical examination and the impact of medications on diving. In addition, DAN addresses scuba diving safety for individuals with underlying health conditions such as asthma and diabetes.

Learning to Scuba Dive

If you’re considering learning to dive, keep in mind that not all your diving will be the same — water and weather conditions vary from dive to dive and even from the beginning to the end of some dives.

You may be required to maneuver through strong currents to reach your dive site — or perform a long surface swim at the end of a dive.

Divers need to be able to perform unexpected strenuous physical tasks. Also, they should not have any health conditions or be taking any medications that may cause problems while diving.

Students learning to dive complete a medical history form before getting into the water, but a physician’s examination may not be required. In some cases, students report medical problems that may prevent them from diving or temporarily restrict their involvement in scuba. These students may be allowed to dive once they have been evaluated and receive a physician’s consent.

Restrictions on Diving

Some medical conditions — such as colds, flu, injury or pregnancy — will temporarily restrict diving. Why? With colds or flu, swelling or blockage in the Eustachian tubes or sinuses may prevent adequate equalization of these air spaces with the water pressure. Injuries to joints and muscles may not only reduce diving ability but also increase susceptibility to decompression illness. Therefore, it is best to postpone diving until the injuries are fully healed. Because little is known about the effects of scuba diving on an unborn child, it is recommended that pregnant women wait to dive until after a pregnancy.

Other medical conditions that restrict the movement of a diver’s arms and legs may in turn limit in-water mobility. Additionally, some people may experience pain or discomfort with the physical exertion of scuba diving. These symptoms can mimic the signs of decompression illness after a dive. Such health issues require individual evaluation by a physician prior to learning to dive.

DAN Dive Safety & Health Series

Predive Physical Examinations

A student is sent for physician referral when a dive instructor wants more information about that individual’s health. The most common reason for referral is that a student has a diagnosed medical condition or is under the care of a physician. The evaluation is simply an assessment of compatibility for scuba with various medical conditions.

If you have questions about your fitness to dive, or if you need evaluation by a diving doctor, DAN can provide you with a list of specialists in your area. Simply call the DAN Dive Safety and Medical Information Line at (919) 684-2948 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. ET.

Other reasons a diving student may be asked to see a doctor include (but are not limited to):

- a history of heart or lung disease;
- an unexplained loss of consciousness or “blackout”;
- a history of nausea or vomiting;
- the use of prescription or nonprescription medications;
- shortness of breath;
- repeated trouble clearing air spaces;
- the appearance of not being physically fit.

No upper age limit for participation in scuba diving exists, provided a diver is healthy and fit and has no disqualifying medical conditions.

Some divers may be asked by their physician to perform an exercise tolerance test to rule out any cardiovascular (heart) problems — this is appropriate when the diver is older or appears generally out of shape. This test allows a physician to collect information about how well an individual responds to exercise.