Breaking Bad: Dozens Of Tourists Suffer Spinal Cord Injuries

Too many people are either not paying attention or not understanding the warning signs posted at many public beaches.

ABOUT 13 HOURS AGO - BY MARINA HILTZ

Scroll To Read

Just hours after starting their Hawaii vacation, Todd Dutman was paralyzed from the neck down.

Dutman, 32, and his family flew from Seattle to Maui in July 2014. They dropped their bags at their condo, got a bite to eat and drove straight to Makena’s Big Beach.

An hour later, Dutman was body surfing in the shore break.

“I was like a human dart into the sand,” Dutman said in an interview from his home in Washington state. “As soon as I hit, I knew something was wrong. I couldn’t feel anything.”

Many tourists suffer spinal cord injuries at Hawaii beaches. An average of 23 visitors per year sustained back and neck injuries from 2009 to 2015, according to Hawaii Department of Health data.

Nearly a third of all spinal cord injuries in the state happen in or around the water, Health Department data show, and just over three-fourths of these injuries are suffered by visitors. From 2009 to 2013, tourists experienced 162 spinal cord injuries on Hawaiian beaches.

Wendy Van Brasse, a flight attendant for Southwest Airlines for 17 years, died less than two weeks after Dutman was injured — in nearly the same spot. Swimming in the waters off Makena, she cracked two vertebrae and suffered a head injury.

That same day, a 17-year-old Arizonan teen, Alex Spontz, was doing flips in the water at Kamaole II, also on Maui, when he landed hard and was paralyzed from the waist down.

Makena on Maui is the worst beach for spinal cord injuries, a review of state Health Department records shows. Hipuus on the Big Island, Brenneke’s on Kauai and Sandy on Oahu are also hazardous locations.
All the debris signs posted at state beach parks warning beachgoers of dangerous shore breaks.

"It's a state-wide issue," said Dan Galano, a Health Department epidemiologist. "I think a lot of visitors don't know how powerful the local conditions can be."

Local residents often make body surfing and boogie boarding look easy and fun, and visitors might not realize how much skill and danger is involved, he said.

"Sandy Beach is the best example I can think of in this regard," Galano said. "The tower guards there, of course, are highly adept at seeing people up and trying to intervene, though."

Sandy Beach Park on the west side of Oahu is one of the most dangerous beaches for spinal cord injuries in Hawaii.

Most injuries that occur in the ocean happen in less than 3 feet of water, often at beaches with strong shore breaks — like Sandy — that typically have rip currents, a shallow sand bottom and powerful waves.

These beaches can pose a special threat to visitors who have little experience in the ocean.

The state and counties are required to post signs warning of the dangerous conditions, but only at public beach parks. They're often ignored, though, it's not uncommon to see towels hanging over them, blocking the message.

DuBauer says he saw those signs the day he was injured, but they weren't enough to deter him from diving head-first into the surf at Makena.

"You've always thinking, 'Oh, that will never happen to me,'" he said. "There's a certain personality that you're not going to deter."

Todd DuBauer, pictured here with his wife in Socrates in 2006, says he paid little attention to warning signs before he dived head-first into a wave at Makena Beach on Maui.

The Department of Health once tried to figure out how useful the signs were and if they were having any impact. A 2005 survey found that a little more than half of beachgoers notice signs posted at Oahu beaches. And about half of the people who noticed the signs read them correctly.

Yet the state made no changes to the signs to make them easier to understand or more visible.

Brigant Velocci, a drowning and spinal cord injury prevention coordinator at the Health Department, says that consistent warnings before visitors ever get to the beach is likely a better way to prevent injuries.

"Are people even reading the signs, and are they doing anything different?" Velocci said. "If they don't speak that language or read that language, then it's probably ineffective."
State officials are trying to figure out how to get people to take warning signs like those at Makaha Beach seriously.

Kaleo is working with the new Drowning and Aquatic Injury Prevention Advisory Committee to craft a message that can be posted on visitor websites, airports and hotels to get tourists' attention before they get to beaches. The committee held its second meeting Dec. 1.

"We definitely can't just rely on signs, that's obvious," Kaleo said.

About the Author
Marina Riker
Marina Riker is an intern for Civil Beat.

Use the RG3 feed to subscribe to Marina Riker's posts today

More Stories In This Special Report

Death In Paradise Is All Too Frequent For Visitors To Hawaii

Enter your email to receive Civil Beat's free daily newsletter