

# Survivor gives lessons learned from shark attack in Lanikai

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As a triathlete and regular swimmer, it is easy to forget that open water swimming can have unexpected dangers.



Abbas

Being a member of a swim club has its advantages when it comes to safety. For example, a local Kailua club regularly swims two routes, either around Popoia (flat) island from Kailua Beach or to the Mokulua (Moks) Islands from Lanikai Beach. They always have two kayakers watching the group, ready to respond in case of an emergency.

My Saturday mostly started like previous weekend mornings: a morning swim followed by some other activity, such as biking, hiking or running. However, this morning I chose to not swim with the swim club like I normally do and stayed back to wait for my friend.

We started our swim at 10 a.m., with my friend ahead of me, two hours after the normal swim club start time. The first thing I noticed was a large amount of debris and large fish swimming fast in the water. I really didn't think about shark safety at that moment.

Shark attacks in the Kailua-Lanikai area do not happen frequently, and I was confident I was safe, especially since I swam the route out to Moks more than a dozen times. We made it to the Moks in 30 minutes and spent 10 minutes talking to kayakers on the shore who shared some water with us.

On the return swim, my friend was about 50-60 feet ahead of me and to the right. After about 10 minutes in the water, a tiger shark attacked him. He was about 500-600 yards from shore.



Whenever out in the water, personnel should follow suggested safety tips. (Courtesy photo)

The shark grabbed on to both of his legs about 6-10 inches above the ankle and dragged him underwater. He punched the shark multiple times while still being dragged underwater. He was finally able to jam his finger in the shark's eye, pulling it out, which caused the shark to release him.

He was bleeding and calling for help when two one-man outrigger canoes, one manned by a dad and the other by his son, heard his cry. They responded quickly.

The dad went to my friend and the 13 year-old son came straight to me. He told me to get on his canoe and quickly started paddling to the shore while calling for help.

After about 10-15 minutes, people appeared from their homes and responded to our calls for help. The dad struggled to get my friend to shore. A surfer, who was 100 feet out, made his way in and assisted the dad.

The dad ripped his shirt off and used it as a tourniquet around my friend's ankles. Even with the waves and sand hitting my friend, it was apparent his legs were badly injured; worse, he was struggling for his life. He had lost a lot of blood and was having trouble breathing.

Paramedics, bystanders, lifeguards, policemen and firemen arrived to assist and moved my friend into the ambulance where they started IVs and provided him with the medical care he required. He was transported to a nearby hospital where he received blood, more fluids and was taken to the operating room to try to repair his legs.

Even after a great effort from the orthopedic and vascular surgeons, my friend lost his right leg below the knee and his left leg is badly injured. He will have a long way to recovery.

But more importantly, my friend is alive and in good spirits.

### **Lessons learned**

The lessons learned from this experience are enormous. Although the setting was not a war zone, shark attacks have similar long-term effects that most of our deployed service members go through when they sustain an IED (improvised explosive device) or land mine attack.



Personnel should use safety tips whenever out in the waters. (Courtesy photo)

The effects include physical and psychological short- and long-term trauma. They include complications of tissue damage, such as bleeding, pain and infection, as well as the experience of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including nightmares, anxiety, panic attacks, depression and substance abuse.

Most patients have a very long rehabilitation period and require a complete change in their lifestyle.

This experience was frightening. I am not sure if any measures will get me to swim in open water again. However, there are a few precautions swimmers can do to improve their safety when they swim in the ocean.

### **Precautions**

Here are some tips I think would be helpful when swimming, surfing or boating long distance from shore.

- Always swim/surf with multiple people and have a kayaker/surfer beside the group in case of an emergency.
- Make sure to have tourniquets and first aid supplies on the kayak.
- Have a cell phone and GPS available on the kayak to be able to call for help and provide a location for rescue.
- Use shark repellent bracelets or similar products for surf boards.
- Make sure you are well rested and alert before swimming/surfing.
- Always swim to your abilities and try not to convince weaker swimmers/surfers to try difficult or long routes with you.

- Use good goggles with anti-fog spray.
- Use fins if going off shore long-distance.

I am really grateful my friend survived this experience. I hope sharing my experience will provide others with insight of what it takes to stay alive after something as horrific as a shark attack happens.

Stay safe and be alert.

### **More Online**

The Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources provides some important tips to reduce the risk of shark bites at <http://dlnr.hawaii.gov/sharks/shark-safety/safety-tips/>.

### **10 Tips**

- 1- Swim, surf or dive with other people, and don't move too far away from assistance.
- 2- Stay out of the water at dawn, dusk and night when some species of sharks may move inshore to feed, but be aware that tiger sharks are known to bite people at all times of the day.
- 3- Do not enter the water if you have open wounds or are bleeding in any way. Sharks can detect blood and body fluids in extremely small concentrations.
- 4- Avoid murky waters, harbor entrances and areas near stream mouths (especially after heavy rains), channels or steep drop-offs. These types of waters are known to be frequented by sharks.
- 5- Do not wear high-contrast clothing or shiny jewelry. Sharks see contrast very well.
- 6- Refrain from excessive splashing. Keep pets, which swim erratically, out of the water. Sharks are known to be attracted to such activity.
- 7- Do not enter the water if sharks are known to be present, and leave the water quickly and calmly if one is sighted. Do not provoke or harass a shark, even a small one.
- 8- If fish or turtles start to behave erratically, leave the water. Be alert to the presence of dolphins, as they are prey for some large sharks.
- 9- Remove speared fish from the water or tow them a safe distance behind you. Do not swim near people fishing or spear fishing. Stay away from dead animals in the water.
- 10- Swim or surf at beaches patrolled by lifeguards, and follow their advice.

*(Courtesy of Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources.)*