

PRESS RELEASE

27th July 2016

Swimmers and beach users are reminded of the venomous Weever fish sting

As we approach the Bank Holiday Weekend, the CEO of Irish Water Safety John Leech wishes to remind swimmers, surfers and all beach users of the little sandy coloured fish that lives in the sea on our beaches. It spends most of the time buried under the sand with just its venomous black dorsal fin showing above the sandy bottom. It grows to a maximum length of 15 centimetres. They are found all round the Irish coast but only in sandy areas where the water is warm and shallow close to the mean low water tide line. There is a new moon on Tuesday and that will give us spring tides which means that swimmers and surfers will have to venture further out on the beach in to the area where the weever live.

We advise the public to avoid swimming approximately one hour to two hours either side of low water to reduce the risk of stepping on them until the tides reverts back towards neaps later next week. The public should wear flip flops or sandals when walking on the beach close to Low Water.

Should a bather step on a weever fish then the pain is excruciating as the spines embed into the human flesh and discharge their poison.

The pain is at its most intense for the first two hours when the foot normally goes red and swells up, and then it may feel numb until the following day with irritation and pain that may last for up to two weeks. Sometimes, the spine breaks off in the foot and it will cause discomfort until it is removed. You won't see a Weever fish easily but you will know it's there if you are unfortunate enough to stand on one since its back has a defensive sting mechanism. The sting can be very painful but will not cause permanent damage.

One danger is that it can cause anaphylactic shock or allergic reaction to those who are vulnerable and people have been known to die.

People who have been stung could take painkillers and if they develop an allergic reaction to the sting, a course of antihistamines is recommended. Seek assistance from a lifeguard who are all qualified first aiders.

Aspivenin syringes can painlessly draw out poison from the wound.

If you are away from a beach with lifeguard support, as soon as possible get the area which has been stung, invariably the foot, into hot water, this increases the blood flow which assists natural cleaning and healing, the heat also helps to break down the poison. The water needs to be over 40 degrees Celsius to be of any benefit in breaking down the poison.

The poison is a type of protein and is heat labile. Most reports of stings occur during the month of August. This does not mean that this fish are particularly prevalent inshore during this month but merely reflects the greater numbers of bathers as the sea temperature reaches the highest of the year. The only death on record after someone being stung by a Weever occurred as long ago as 1927, when an angler suffered multiple stings whilst fishing off Dungeness in the UK.

The mouth itself is in an unusual position on its head, oblique and almost vertical and contains some of the most sharp and vicious looking teeth in the undersea world. Luckily it only reaches about 15 cm long. The Weever has to be quick to catch its prey though, and for half a metre it has a fair turn of speed, before sinking to the sea floor. This fish does not have a swim bladder, the device used by most bony fish to keep buoyant.

The species found in shallow waters is called the Lesser Weever with the scientific name of *Echiichthys vipera*. The word 'weever' was first found used in the English language during the 17th century and comes from the Old northern French word 'wivre'.



Irish Water Safety encourages everyone to take swimming, water safety or rescue classes, which are ongoing at present around the country.

<http://www.iws.ie/courses--jobs-page.html#Courses>

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