

SWIM FOR YOUR LIFE: They jump in at a command from lifeguard and swimming instructor George Lee, 44, who believes in teaching children to respect the dangers of water. What needs to be done to make sure that children learning to swim stay safe in the pool? The Straits Times asks the experts. ♦ See Page 38

Swim well? Many S'poreans are all at sea

That's why extra caution needed in water sports, say swimming coaches

Jamie Ee Wen Wei

As many as 100,000 people in Singapore take lessons at swimming pools every day.

But swimming instructors and water sports associations here say that Singaporeans are not necessarily good swimmers, especially in open-water conditions.

This is one reason they should be more careful when taking part in water sports, they say.

Moreover, many here seldom swim in the sea and so are unused to its rough conditions.

Mr Henry Sim, 54, honorary secretary of the Singapore Canoe Federation, said: "Many Singaporeans think that since they can swim in swimming pools, they can swim anywhere. But it's different in the open sea. There are no lifeguards and water conditions are unpredictable."

Mr Richard Tan, 48, president of the Singapore Life Saving Society (SLSS), agreed: "At sea, there are

National serviceman Dominic Seow, 20, can testify to that. When he was swimming at an East Coast beach to pass a sailing proficiency test three years ago, the strong swimmer found the water conditions "hostile".

Mr Seow, who swims every weekend and has a National Survival Swimming Award (Nassa) in the gold category, said: "Some of the bigger waves can actually cover you."

As most swimming lessons are conducted in pools, many Singaporeans are not used to open-water conditions, said four swimming coaches The Sunday Times spoke to.

There are more than 1,000 swimming pools here, including public pools and those at condominiums, clubs and hotels.

Going by interviews with 20 Singaporeans, many are afraid to swim in the sea.

Banker Denise Teo, 37, is one parent who forbids her two children, aged seven and 10, from swimming in the sea. This despite signing them up for a swimming course a year ago. She, too, will not swim in the sea.

She said: "We shouldn't be swimming in the sea in the first place. If you're going in a group to explore



ST FILE PHOTO

Students training for the National Survival Swimming Award which tests water safety knowledge. At different levels, participants must be able to tread water, dive or swim certain distances using different strokes. However, more should be done to build up swimming skills, say swimming coaches.

MAN DROWNS IN KALLANG BASIN

A 25-year-old man drowned yesterday morning in Kallang Basin behind the Costa Rhu condominium.

Police received a call at 2.30am yesterday informing them that a man had disappeared into the river.

A water-rescue vehicle, inflatable boat and two divers were sent to search for him.

Mr Mohammad Azman was found at 4.40am by a diver. His body was 4m from the banks of Marina Promenade. He was pronounced dead by paramedics.

He is suspected to have fallen into the water. Police are investigating it as a case of unnatural death.

Since 1998, at least 367 people have drowned but it is not known how many of these cases occurred in pools and in open water.

They said that over the years, too much emphasis has been placed on passing the Nassa test, which focuses on survival skills and

Introduced in 1978, Nassa tests water safety knowledge and survival swimming skills. There are four award classes: bronze, silver, gold and gold star. At different levels, participants must tread water, dive or swim certain distances using different strokes.

Swimming instructor Jeremy Chian, 34, said he has seen many young swimmers with Nassa certificates whose swimming ability is just "half past six".

Mr David Lim, 41, president of the Swimming Coaches and Teachers Association of Singapore, agreed. "I have seen many young swimmers who have passed the Nassa bronze test but can't swim a proper stroke."

All agreed that swimming skills must be practised regularly or they can be forgotten.

Swimming is not a compulsory skill in schools but about 60 primary schools have joined the National Water Safety Council's Learn To Swim Programme that teaches basic swimming proficiency.

A recent Ministry of Education survey found that 95 out of 110 primary schools have some form of swimming programme.

One thing everyone interviewed agreed on was that swimming is a good life skill.

Said SLSS's Mr Tan: "Over 75 per cent of earth is covered by water. Even if you want to avoid water, you can't."

jamiieee@sph.com.sg

**Additional reporting by
Priscilla Goy and Gabriel Yue**