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It's Shark Week! Why You **SHOULDN'T** Be Afraid to Get in the Water

Monday, August 13, 2012 at 12:30 PM

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Da-dun ... da-dun ... it's Shark Week again! This summer marks the Discovery Channel's 25th week dedicated to those amazing -- and sometimes terrifying -- creatures of the sea. Are you suddenly afraid to dip your freshly [pedicured](#) toe into the water because you're sure it's going to be nibbled off by a hungry Great White? You shouldn't be.

"Utter rubbish," shark expert Mahmood Shivji, Ph.D., director of the Guy Harvey Research Institute and Save Our Seas Shark Center at Nova Southeastern University, tells HealthySELF about what he says is the biggest misconception about sharks: that they will bite humans every chance they get.



Great hammerhead shark, an endangered species. (c) B. Watts/GHRI

Shivji says this misconception of sharks as big, bad people-eaters is "an environmentally damaging misconception that has been developed over the years by the media's penchant for hyper-exaggerating the very few shark bites that occur on humans in a year."

Just how likely is it that you'll end up as shark dinner if you go for a dip in the U.S.? According to The California Academy of Sciences, shark attacks are most common in the months of August and September in the Golden State; if you're in Florida, September's the busiest month for bites (according to National Geographic), but that doesn't mean you need to stick to the pool.

"It's far, far riskier to drive your car in most urban areas than it is to get bitten by a shark while swimming in the ocean," says Shivji, adding that he'd be much more worried about drowning or being struck by lightning than being bitten by a shark. Put the relative danger into perspective this way, he says: "There have been over 260 cases of fatal dog attacks on humans in the U.S. since 2001, for an average of about 23 per year. In that time there have been only 10 fatal cases of shark attacks -- an average of less than one per year." (Woah -- maybe we need to start Dog Week?!)

If you're still a little nervous about plunging into the deep blue, Shivji says you can keep yourself safest by making sure to heed posted warnings (they're there for a reason). Also, he says, it's a good idea to avoid swimming in two spots: close to effluent outfalls (where wastewater treatment systems discharge treated water into the ocean -- ew); and areas where a lot of people are fishing, because bait in the water can attract sharks.

But don't worry TOO much. According to Shivji, there has been an average of 39 shark attacks per year in the U.S. over the past 12 years, but again, less than one of those per year is fatal. "People should not be afraid to get into the ocean as far as the risk of shark attack is concerned," he says.

Plus, most sharks aren't the least bit interested in getting a taste of your sunless tanner! "There is a huge variety of shark types, but the vast majority are small," says Shivji. The largest sharks are the whale sharks (which grow up to 60 feet) and basking sharks (up to 40 feet), and both are filter-feeders whose diets consist mainly of small plankton and fish eggs (i.e., they do not bite humans despite being the largest sharks in the world).

The smallest shark discovered (so far) is a deep sea shark that only gets up to about 8 inches in size. "The media, unfortunately, typically only portray sharks as large, human-biting machines, so the general public is unaware of the large diversity of shark forms, their amazing biology and the severe plight of many sharks," says Shivji, explaining that sharks are being killed in huge numbers around the world to satisfy the demands of the shark fin markets. "Healthy shark populations are very important to maintain healthy and balanced oceans," says Shivji. "Sharks are not just mean predators -- that's a huge Hollywood- and media-generated misconception."

Shivji says he hopes this year's Shark Week will "provide a more conservation-oriented and more accurate perspective on the plight of sharks." Unfortunately, he says, it's more common that visuals of shark attacks and shark teeth will be used to garner ratings. After all, Shivji says, "People don't like boring sharks."