Allegan County is home to 1,008 square miles of water consisting of over 277 inland lakes and ponds. These bodies of water are frequented by fisherman, sportsmen and people of all ages who partake in a wide variety of activities.

With the arrival of cold winter weather ponds, lakes and rivers begin to freeze. As winter sports enthusiasts begin to take to the frozen waters, the Allegan County Sheriff's Office Dive / Rescue & Recovery Team would like to share ice safety tips and remind the public of the hidden dangers associated with being on the ice.

⇒ First and foremost, **dress appropriately** and in layers. Clothing that is made from man-made fibers does not protect the wearer for long when wet. Wool insulates better from the effects of hypothermia when dry or wet. Wear insulated and waterproof boots and bring extra clothing.

⇒ **Tell someone where you're going** and when you expect to return. A good plan can help first responders find you quickly when you do not return.

⇒ **Go out with a partner** or friends. In the event someone falls through the ice, others are there that can help. Call 911 immediately before attempting self rescue efforts.

⇒ **Wear a life jacket or pfd** over your coat.

⇒ **Stay off river ice** and ice covering moving water. Moving water can cause several weak areas of ice not easily visible.

⇒ **Test the Ice** before going out on it. Ice is rarely uniform in thickness. It can be a foot thick in one place and only an inch thick just 10 feet away.

⇒ **Thick Ice is not necessarily strong ice**. Even thick ice may be weak, especially if it has frozen and thawed repeatedly or if it contains layers of snow or water.

⇒ **Dark areas are visible signs of weakness**. Keep away from these areas.

⇒ **Different types of ice have different strengths for the same thickness**. Clear blue, black or green ice is the strongest. 4" (10 cm) of this ice should safely support 1 or 2 people. White or opaque ice should be at least twice as thick (8" or 20 cm) to safely support the same number of people.

⇒ **Snow acts like an insulating blanket**. The ice under the snow will be thinner and weaker. A new snowfall can also insulate, warm-up and melt existing ice. Ice with layers of snow may not support anyone.

⇒ A cold snap with very cold temperatures quickly weakens ice and can cause large cracks within half a day. A warm spell can take several days to weaken the ice.

⇒ If the ice begins to break under you, slowly lay down to disperse your weight and roll away from the area in the direction you came from.

⇒ The better you swim, the better your chances of rescuing yourself if you fall through ice. This is a myth. After as little as five minutes, cold water begins to rob you of your ability to move your limbs. This makes it very difficult for you to get out of the water, no matter how well you can swim!

So what should you do if you fall through the ice? **If you fall into cold water, get into HELP (Heat Escape Lessening Position).**


H.E.L.P. Position

- Bring your knees to your chest, hold your arms to your sides and clasp your hands, and cover your head if possible to protect your body from heat loss.
- DO NOT try to swim. Swimming causes "warm" blood to circulate to your arms and legs, where it cools off quickly & reduces survival time by as much as 35-50%!
- If you cannot get into the HELP position, hang onto the ice edge and yell for help while trying to keep your knees to your chest.

Minimum Ice Thickness for New Clear Hard Ice:
The following ice thickness recommendations for safe loads are valid **ONLY** for ice that is clear and sound, with no flowing water underneath. Ice thickness should be checked in several locations.

3" (7cm) or less STAY OFF

4" (10cm) ice fishing, walking, cross country skiing

5" (12cm) one snowmobile or ATV

8"-12" (20-30cm) one car or small pickup

12"-15" (30-38cm) one medium truck (pickup or van)