



Why Bodies of Water Are Dangerous for Shih Tzus: What Every Owner Needs to Know

Many people assume that all dogs are natural swimmers—but this is not true, especially for brachycephalic (short-nosed) breeds like the Shih Tzu. In reality, Shih Tzus are at a much higher risk around water, and even shallow bodies of water can become life-threatening.

Understanding why Shih Tzus struggle in water—and how to protect them—can save lives.

Shih Tzus Are Not Built to Swim

Shih Tzus were bred to be companions, not working or water-retrieving dogs. Their physical structure makes swimming extremely difficult and exhausting.

Key factors include:



- Short, flat faces (brachycephalic airway)
Their shortened nasal passages make breathing more difficult, especially during exertion. In water, this can quickly lead to panic or oxygen deprivation.
- Heavy chest and short legs
Their body weight is concentrated toward the front, causing them to tip forward in water rather than float evenly.
- Dense coat
When wet, their coat becomes heavy, pulling them downward and increasing fatigue.

Because of these traits, Shih Tzus do not naturally float or paddle efficiently.

Drowning Can Happen Quietly and Quickly

One of the most dangerous misconceptions is that drowning is dramatic or obvious. In dogs—especially small breeds—it is often silent and fast.

VBSPCA

DOG WATER SAFETY

PROTECT YOUR PET

Spending time in the water with your pet can be a fun way for them to enjoy the great outdoors, especially during the hot months of summer. However, knowing the basic rules of water safety is a must for all pet parents, especially considering over 5,000 dogs are estimated to drown in pools each year.

The Most Important Water Safety Rule:

Always Keep An Eye On Pets While Near Water

This includes pools, oceans, lakes, and rivers. Never allow unsupervised swimming as accidents can happen very quickly.

Additional Safety Tips To Keep In Mind:



Water Conditions

Rip currents, undertows, or fast moving currents can be extremely dangerous for canines and humans alike.



Life Jackets

Dog life jackets not only keep your dog afloat, but can also help you spot them in the water and make it easier for you to pull them out.



Take Breaks

Swimming can be very tiring for dogs. Stay close to your pet and make sure they take breaks in the shade.



Wash Up

Rinse off your dog after swim sessions. Salt or pool chemicals can irritate your dog's skin. Additionally, if your dog licks their fur, the salt or pool chemicals could make them sick.



Take Precautions

Your dog should be able to easily get out of the water on their own. Install stairs, a ramp that is made for pets, or a fence to keep them out of the water.



Bring Drinking Water

Lake, river, pool, or ocean water can make your pet sick since it can contain bacteria, algae, parasites, chemicals, or salt.



Not all dogs like to swim or are good swimmers. If your canine companion is more of a land lover, try introducing them to baby pools or spraying them with a hose as alternative outdoor water activities. To learn more visit, vbspca.com/pet-care-resources.

A Shih Tzu can:

- Slip into water and sink within seconds
- Become exhausted trying to keep their head above water
- Panic, inhale water, and lose strength rapidly

This can happen in:

- Swimming pools

- Backyard ponds
- Bathtubs
- Kiddie pools
- Lakes, creeks, or retention ponds

Even experienced dog owners are often shocked by how quickly an incident occurs.

Pools Are Especially Dangerous

Swimming pools are one of the most common drowning hazards for Shih Tzus.

Why pools are risky:

- Steep sides make it difficult or impossible for small dogs to climb out
- Dogs may fall in accidentally while playing or exploring
- Panic sets in quickly once they realize they cannot exit

Important: Even dogs that have been in pools before can drown if they become tired or disoriented.

“My Shih Tzu Has Swum Before” Is Not a Guarantee

Some Shih Tzus can paddle briefly—but this does not mean they are safe swimmers.

Short bursts of movement can:

- Mask fatigue
- Give owners a false sense of security
- End suddenly when the dog tires or panics

Swimming ability can also change with:

- Age

- Weight gain
- Health issues
- Hot weather

A dog that seemed fine once may struggle the next time.

Secondary Water Risks: Aspiration & Delayed Drowning

Even if a Shih Tzu is rescued quickly, water exposure can still be dangerous.

Inhaling water can lead to:

- Aspiration pneumonia
- Breathing distress hours later
- Lethargy, coughing, or labored breathing

Any dog that has inhaled water should be monitored closely and evaluated by a veterinarian if symptoms appear.

How to Keep Your Shih Tzu Safe Around Water

1. Never Leave Them Unsupervised

Shih Tzus should never have free access to pools, ponds, or other bodies of water.

2. Use Physical Barriers

- Pool fencing with self-latching gates
- Secure pond covers
- Closed bathroom doors

3. Life Jackets Are Essential

If your Shih Tzu will be near water:



- Use a properly fitted dog life jacket
- Ensure it has a handle for quick lifting
- Do not rely on swimming ability alone

4. Avoid Forced Swimming

Never “teach” a Shih Tzu to swim by placing them in water. This can cause panic, inhalation of water, and long-term fear.

5. Be Extra Cautious During Gatherings

Pool parties, holidays, and busy days increase risk due to distractions.

Final Thoughts

Shih Tzus are loving, playful companions—but they are not water-safe dogs. Their anatomy makes swimming difficult, exhausting, and potentially fatal, even in shallow or calm water.

Awareness, supervision, and prevention are the best tools we have to keep them safe.

When it comes to Shih Tzus and water, caution is not overprotective—it's responsible care.



A Note From the Breeder

As a Shih Tzu breeder, the safety and well-being of my puppies does not end when they leave my home. It is my responsibility to educate families on breed-specific risks, and water safety is one of the most critical.

Shih Tzus are not natural swimmers, and I strongly advise all owners to treat any body of water—pools, ponds, lakes, bathtubs, and even kiddie pools—as a serious hazard. I do not recommend allowing Shih Tzus to swim freely or unsupervised at any time.

This information is shared not to cause fear, but to prevent avoidable tragedies. Awareness and prevention save lives, and I believe every Shih Tzu deserves a safe environment tailored to their unique anatomy and needs.

If you ever have questions about safety, care, or prevention, I am always here as a lifelong resource for my puppy families.