



## Are Diving Medicals Just a Bother?

Have you ever had a diving medical? In some countries (e.g. Australia & New Zealand) they are mandatory before even starting a dive course, but in most countries in the world they are not necessary and a pre-dive medical questionnaire is all that is used to screen for the common medical conditions that make diving high risk, eg. epilepsy and heart disease. Even when divers have had a diving medical at the beginning of their diving career, they never have another one, so really, what is the point?

There is little evidence to show that having a compulsory diving medical will prevent dive accidents and lower diving fatalities. One thing I have learnt in medicine is that most people will do what they want to do, whatever a doctor says. The old style diving medical used to be a judgement as to whether the diver is considered medically fit to dive or not fit to dive. This is no longer an acceptable conclusion. The diver needs to be fully informed and an integral part of the decision making process.

This is why I wrote a book about diving medicals!

The population of divers has changed over the past thirty years. It used to be a male-dominated macho adventure sport where danger was welcomed, limits pushed, short cuts encouraged and generally there was a blasé attitude to safety. I still am amazed that I am still alive after some of the stupid dive profiles I have done.

Luckily, both the population of divers and the culture of the diving industry has changed.

Although diving is classed as an adventure sport, adventure and danger are no longer synonymous. Divers want to be amazed, astounded, excited, exhilarated, challenged, connected, but not risk life or limb.

Divers have become older and younger, more women are diving, people with all types of disabilities are diving, and generally diving safely.

By far the greatest way to reduce any danger whilst diving is to be well-trained, use well-designed and well-maintained equipment, and be generally physically fit.

But one more way to reduce the dangers of diving is to be aware of and minimise any known risk caused by one's medical condition. This is the purpose of the diving medical, to identify and describe the medical risk. Once this is known, then it can be decided, by both diver and doctor, whether the risk is acceptable and, if so, how it can be minimised.

But to do this effectively the doctor must know something about diving. In the basic medical training there is NO training in diving medicine. They must therefore be specially trained to know about the gas laws, about barotrauma, about decompression illness. They must know the relevance of various medical conditions to the underwater world. They must understand basic diving techniques and the common stresses experienced by the diver. They must understand the common causes of accidents in divers. With this information they can then relate the medical condition to the diving environment and diver, and give an informed opinion.

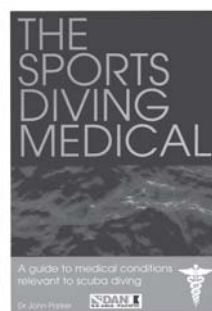
Alas there are few properly trained doctors in many parts of the world. So what can the recreational diver do?

Firstly, it is still a good idea to have a general medical check before starting to dive and regularly throughout your life. Conditions such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes frequently have no symptoms until late in their development. With any major illness it is sensible to check whether it is relevant to your continued safe diving.

Secondly there are some very good sites on the internet to look up the relevance of obvious problems related to diving. In these sites many of the contentious medical conditions in diving, eg. asthma and diabetes are thoroughly discussed. There is no right or wrong rule and the more informed information that you can read then the more balanced decision you will be able to form. These websites include:

[www.danseap.org](http://www.danseap.org) the home page of DAN SE Asia-Pacific with a link to a dedicated site (DAN DOC) dealing with Diving Medical Issues.

[www.scuba-doc.com/](http://www.scuba-doc.com/) "Diving Medicine Online", the home page of Dr Ernest Campbell MD with an extensive and easily found list of medical conditions written especially for non-medical readers.



A very accessible, readable and yet comprehensive guide to medical conditions relevant to recreational scuba diving,

Available from DAN SEAP