

Mask Removal and Replacement

The scuba mask is the most basic piece of equipment. It is the viewing window to the underwater world and the first item usually purchased upon deciding to become a diver. During certification class, considerable time is spent practicing mask handling skills. Despite this, many divers are still uncomfortable with their mask, especially removing and replacing it underwater. This is typically one of the skills divers are most anxious about, and yet it's one of the simplest and most important.

The ability to calmly and efficiently remove and replace the mask underwater is a good indication of overall diving comfort. It's also a crucial practical skill. If the mask is accidentally dislodged during a dive (and anyone who dives much will experience that) or when removing it to fix a broken strap, divers will be thankful to have practiced mask removal and replacement until it's second nature.

While becoming comfortable having the mask off underwater may take some effort, it can mean the difference between a minor irritation and dangerous panic. As with most scuba skills, being thoroughly familiar with the technique and practicing it conscientiously is the key to safe, enjoyable diving.

Mask Removal Underwater. The biggest trauma in removing the mask underwater is that it is usually unplanned and happens suddenly, without prior warning. Perhaps a buddy accidentally kicks the diver in the face, a diver bumps into something or a mask strap breaks. The surprise, plus the shock of water hitting the face (especially if it's cold water), can cause an involuntary gasp which sometimes results in inhaling water through the nose. If not controlled immediately, choking and panic may follow. Many divers also find it difficult to continue breathing slowly and deeply through their mouths with their mask off.

The solution to this unpleasant scenario is to practice removing the mask and breathing underwater for at least a minute at a time, until the diver can do it without altering their breathing rate and pattern. This skill takes active concentration; a diver must maintain positive pressure in the nostrils so that water will not enter as the diver continues to inhale and exhale through their mouth.

If getting water in the nose, or the fear of it, is a source of anxiety, divers should begin a no-mask exercise by pinching the nostrils or by exhaling simultaneously through the nose and mouth. The diver must concentrate on inhaling only through the mouth. Gradually release your nostrils and switch back to exhaling totally through the mouth. Divers must develop the discipline to sustain a slow, deep mouth-breathing pattern without a mask, and when the need arises they will have no problem taking the time to calmly and deliberately replace the mask.

A helpful hint: When purposely removing the mask during a dive, the shock of water hitting the face can be minimized by breaking the seal gradually. Let the water trickle in a little at a time. After the mask is fully flooded, it can be removed with little change in breathing pattern.

Mask Replacement Underwater. The most popular procedure for replacing a mask underwater is to seat the mask on the face and then pull the strap over the head as follows:

1. Arrange the mask, strap and snorkel in the proper positions relative to the face. This sounds obvious, but divers have been known to replace the mask upside down in their rush to get it back on quickly. Divers should make sure that the mask is right side up, the strap is not tangled or twisted and the snorkel is on the left and not wrapped inside the strap. It's easiest to do this with the eyes open, but if a diver wears contact lenses or are otherwise unable to open their eyes underwater, this step can also be performed quite successfully by feel. Divers should take their time and use both hands to examine the entire mask assembly for correct positioning. Use the nose pocket and snorkel as guides.
2. Divers should fold the strap up and forward and seat the mask comfortably against the face. Divers should hold the mask in place with one hand while using the other to sweep hair out of the way, move the edge of the hood, smooth down a mustache and generally confirm an unobstructed sealing surface. Some divers prefer to clear the mask of water at this point, other wait until the strap is in place.
3. While pressing the mask against the face with one hand, lift or slide the mask strap back over the head with other. Divers should be able to accomplish this without dislodging the mask. The next step is to pull the strap down only as far as the widest part of the head. If it is found that the mask is positioned too low, it should not be pushed back up; instead a diver should lift it and start over. Otherwise, especially if a diver has long hair, it will just slide back down.
4. A diver should clear the mask not if they have not already done so. Now both hands are free in case the mask needs reseating or the strap is twisted. If the mask strap is designed with a split in the back then spread it out for a better hold. (Position a split strap above and below a hair knot or high pony tail.)

When wearing a hood, the strap may be hard to slide back across the neoprene. The suggested alternative is:

1. Place the mask against the forehead and hold with one hand.
2. slide the strap back over the head with the other hand.
3. Use both hands to pull the mask into place on the face, then clear.

The key to removing and replacing the mask easily and calmly underwater is to maintain a normal breathing pattern and move slowly and deliberately. To reacquaint oneself with no-mask breathing, divers should occasionally practice the maneuver. Of course, it should be done in a secure setting and with the buddy's knowledge.

Donning a Mask Above Water. For many divers, the only attention the mask gets before a dive is defogging. However, the process of preparing to don the mask should begin will before entry, during gear setup. That is the time to make sure that the mask strap is adjusted properly, not when you are about to enter the water or during the dive. Underwater, it is not uncommon for a mask to flood while a hapless diver is tugging on the strap to adjust it.

Divers should preadjust their mask by seating it against the face and pulling the strap over the head as described earlier for mask replacement underwater. The mask strap should be loose enough to pull down easily over the back of the head with one hand. It is difficult to get the strap over the head, it is too tight. A diver should loosen the strap and try again. Once the mask is on, the strap can be snugged slightly by pulling the loose ends.

Divers should not overtighten the mask. Remember, underwater the increased ambient pressure works to keep the mask on the face. As long as a diver does not exhale through the nose, it should remain sealed even without a strap. With the mask correctly preadjusted, divers simply slip it on before enter -- no fiddling or last-minute rush necessary.

To don the mask at entry time, divers simply need to place it against the face, seated comfortably below the nose. If the mask is pressing upward on the nose, as soon as you exhale through the nose, equalize or even just move, water is likely to enter. While holding the mask in place with one hand, use the other to check the perimeter of the skirt for obstructions. Strands of hair, the edges of a hood or the end of the mask strap caught underneath the skirt are common sources of leakage.

Before a diver enters, he or she should be sure that the mask strap is positioned across the widest portion of the skull. For most people this is well above the ears. If the strap is too low, it may slide down during the dive, causing the mask to feel loose under the nose. If the strap is too high, it could slip off over the top of the head.

MASK REMOVAL ABOVE WATER - Back on the surface after a dive, the question is not so much how to remove the mask as when. Divers who are not comfortable with their mask have a tendency to remove it as soon as they hit the surface. Think about that -- a diver has been diving for 30 minutes or more, seeing well enough to enjoy the scenery and breathing through the mouth. Why should a diver remove the mask before he or she is out of the water?

There are many reason for leaving the mask on: It saves energy by allowing the diver to rest with his or her face in the water. a diver can see his or her fins for easier removal,

when it is on the face a diver can't lose it and it keeps surface chop from getting in the eyes and nose, to name just a few. Divers should strive to be so comfortable with the mask that it becomes part of the face and there is not even an awareness about having it on. A large percentage of diving accidents occur as a result of taking the mask off prematurely . Salt water in the face and nose can cause the glottis to clamp shut making it impossible to breathe. Keep your mask on your face until you are totally and completely out of the water.

If a diver must remove the mask (perhaps due to fogging or sinus drainage), hold on to it or otherwise anchor it securely. Perching it on the head or letting it dangle from the forearm is inviting its disappearance.

Smooth, calm mask handling above and below water is the mark of a comfortable diver. Divers should invest in a quality mask that seals perfectly on the face. Masks should be defogged thoroughly and adjusted properly. Divers should be able to remove and replace the mask underwater and keep it on their face until they are safely out of the water. Over time, it will come to feel like a part of the face. Once out of the water when you remove your mask, be sure to store it so that it will not be deformed or damaged. Keep it away from heat and don't ever let anything heavy rest on it.