

What are the Odds of Getting Struck By Lightning?

Courtesy of the United States National Lightning Safety Institute

The oft-repeated myth would have it that you are more likely to be struck by lightning playing golf than while pursuing any other activity. But is it true?

If you play golf you probably know the feeling - you're enjoying a leisurely round when those ominous dark clouds roll in and the growl of approaching thunder makes you start missing your putts. How worried should you really be about being struck by lightning? It turns out that although golf is not the most frequent activity cited in cases of death from lightning strikes, when you adjust for the participation in the activities, you find it does appear to be the riskiest.

The most substantial study was an analysis by the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 1997 of 3,239 deaths over 35 years. They found that five times more people are killed by lightning in open fields or parks. Golfers, in fact accounted for only 5% of deaths during the period.

Most authorities have used this information to discount the risk to golfers.

But this ignores the fact that far more people participate in other outdoor activities than in golf. If you adjust these figures by the number of people playing golf relative to the number that participate in the other activities, you get a very different picture - and it turns out that playing golf might well be the riskiest activity out there.

According to the National Golf Foundation of the US there are 26.4 million golfers in the US. So the statistics translate into one death for every 4.7 million golfers per year.

Now assume that 50% of the United States population visits "open fields, parks or playgrounds" at least once each year, and that half of them can be found at least occasionally "under trees." That gives a likelihood of one lightning death per 5.3 million visiting open fields, parks or playgrounds, and one in 5.2 million of those wandering under trees.

As for the risks on water, they are trifling by comparison. According to the National Marine Manufacturers Association 77.8 million Americans (30%) participate in boating activities alone, so it must be assumed that at least 130m Americans either go boating, swimming or fishing. This would give just one death in 17.4 million.

So what should you do? You're not exactly going to give up your sport because one in every five million American golfers is struck by lightning each year, are you? No, but look at it this way: the overall odds of being struck by lightning each year are estimated at 1 in 600,000. That makes one in 7,500 throughout an 80-year life, which is not negligible. In fact, you are far more likely to be struck by lightning than to win the lottery. So the risk is real enough to be worth taking some time reading about sensible safety precautions.

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