

# Man-of-War Facts for Swimmers

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In truth, it's probably very peaceful being a man-of-war. Your gas-bag catches the wind, you sail along. Your tentacles droop and roll with the flow of the ocean. Occasionally you stun and digest a small fish. Burp.

You wait for tiny male and female parts to grow so you can reproduce yourself without dating. Maybe you drift toward a beach and scare the Speedos off those oddly rigid humans.

And all the time, you look like a giant science-fiction jelly-brained space mutant that seems to have gotten off on the wrong planet.

"They're very otherworldly," said Laurence Madin, senior scientist in the biology department at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI).

"They live in an environment that is completely different from what we're used to, basically weightless and infinite. It's much more like floating around in space than it is crawling on the land."

Lately, these beasties have floated into our consciousness, as the watery paratroopers have drifted around Cape and Islands beaches, stinging several bathers and closing several beaches to swimming.

While their presence is not uncommon in our waters, in truth, it's tough not to yell "ALIEN!" and run for high ground.

Perhaps, although not likely, it would be soothing to know that the Portuguese man-of-war is the best-known and only surface-dwelling member of a stringy, gelatinous, predator order.

Siphonophores, with nearly 200 known species, some tethered to the bottom with their tentacles, others floating like spacewalking astronauts in the water column, include several species that are the longest animals in the world.

In an attempt to scoop up this living fettuccine into a neat box of explainer science, postdoctoral student Casey Dunn of the University of Hawaii shared his Siamese Twin analogy about the man-of-war lifecycle over the phone last week.

Imagine this, said the biologist: "You were born solitary and started budding twins out of you - complete human beings. Some of them specialize only in feeding, maybe they have a big mouth and not much of anything else. Others have just legs, and others just reproduce, so it's kind of like, instead of making your legs bigger, you just bud off specialized twins that have big legs."

Oh, yeah, we forgot to mention that siphonophores, including the man-of-war, are not really just

one animal, but a colony of integrated "zooids" (pronounced: "zoh-widz"). These Dr. Seuss-sounding critters - similarly structured to solitary animals - spring from the same egg, eventually budding out of the first-to-develop zooid.

What separates a jellyfish from a man-of-war is that the jellyfish is one organism - not a floating trailer park of united zooids.

It's almost too much to wrap your brain around. You can almost imagine these siphonophore scientists, ensconced in lava-lamped labs, continuously saying, "Far out!"

"It's important to know all the could-have-beens or very different ways of doing things to help inform our general understanding of how life evolved," Dunn said, "to make sure our thoughts aren't constrained too much."

Cue odd conversation with Dunn about no one really knowing how long these big underwater siphonophores live. They could be forever-old like wiggly redwoods. Yet they are so fragile that "some species entirely disintegrate when you just shine a light on them," Dunn said.

The man-of-war is sturdier than that, with its comparatively hearty, mostly carbon monoxide-filled gas-bag. To capture one for analysis, scientists generally approach the animal in a small boat, then scoop it up in a bucket.

That's when scientists can get stung.

"It hurt quite a lot," said WHOI's Madin, victim of a bucket-capture zap. "Actually, I felt numbness on the whole side of my body for an hour or so. So it was noticeable. I don't think there are any fatalities attributed to it, but it certainly could be unpleasant."

Storms and warm currents likely brought our gooey friends here this summer, say scientists - perhaps a little earlier in the season than usual - but they stressed man-of-war aren't rare in Cape waters.

And Madin answered perhaps the most important man-of-war question: Are they giant-brained plotters, set on world domination?

"Probably not," Madin said. "There is a nervous system, but there's not a centralized nervous system, with anything resembling a brain. They can respond to some stimuli, but I wouldn't credit them with any kind of intelligence or consciousness."

Phew!

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