

Interesting facts about the great white shark

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In 1974, Peter Benchley published *Jaws*, a horror novel that sold 20 million copies, spawned an iconic film, and brought the great white shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*) to notoriety. Although the book brought him fame and fortune, Benchley had second thoughts about its negative portrayal of the great white shark. In fact, the shark... couldn't be the villain; it would have to be written as the victim. The great white shark is now classified as a vulnerable species. Here are some little-known facts about the great white shark.

Great white sharks roll their eyes as a defense mechanism

Many sharks protect their eyeballs with a pair of nictitating membranes, which act as transparent eyelids. But great whites lack these membranes. Instead, their eyeballs reflexively roll back into the skull when the shark bites a writhing victim. This exposes the scleral membrane, a fibrous tissue that surrounds the eye.

Some reports of the size of great white sharks appear to be unreliable.

There is no doubt that the great white shark is a giant fish — but some claims about its maximum size are probably exaggerated. In 1870, a zoologist measured the jawless jaw of a large adult great white and estimated

that the entire animal must have been around 35 feet long. But a modern reassessment comparing the jaw with those of other dead sharks suggests that the creature was probably around 16 feet long, and reports of this giant shark may have been a printer's error.

Then there is the Cojímar specimen, a great white shark caught and killed near Cuba in the early 1940s. Eyewitnesses said the fish was 6.4m long and weighed 3,220kg. This claim has since been disputed by experts, who have used a readily available photograph to calculate that the animal's true length was around 5m. According to biologist José Castro's book *The Sharks of North America*, the largest great white shark "believed to have been reliably measured" was 6m long. When it comes to weight, large males can weigh up to 1,278kg, while the largest females can weigh 1,969kg.

The great white shark is closely related to the mako shark.

According to a 2016 article, there are 509 species of sharks divided into nine orders and 34 families. The great white shark belongs to the family Lamnidae, which includes only four other species: the porbeagle shark, the salmon shark, the longfin mako shark, and the shortfin mako shark. All five shark species have conical snouts, jet-black eyes, and long gill openings.



They can keep warm in cold water.

Most sharks have no direct control over their body temperature; they are as hot or cold as the water they swim in. But a few species, including five members of the Lamnidae family, are endothermic, meaning they can maintain a consistently high body temperature even in cold water.

Great white sharks naturally generate heat when their muscles contract, warming the blood in that area, which is then redistributed to other parts of the body. This allows great white sharks to maintain a core body temperature as high as 25°F, warmer than the surrounding water, meaning they can thrive in cold places. When muscles are kept warm, they work more efficiently, so great white sharks can swim faster and farther than many other shark species. On the other hand, great white sharks need to consume a large number of calories to maintain their body temperature.

Not all great white sharks hunt the same prey.

Great white sharks have a varied diet, and not all individuals have the same food preferences. In general, young sharks tend to eat fish and squid, while older, larger sharks tend to hunt larger targets like marine mammals. Catching small fish and biting into fat seals are very different tasks. This explains why young great whites have narrower teeth than adults—to make it easier to pierce the skin of smooth fish. Living sharks of all species possess multiple rows of teeth, and they are constantly replacing old teeth with new ones. As great whites mature, their teeth become wider, serrated, and triangular, allowing adult great whites to tear large chunks of flesh from their victims.

Great white sharks can fly in the air

Calorie-rich pinnipeds like seals and sea lions are popular prey for great white sharks, which often attack from below with a massive explosion. Great white sharks can reach speeds of more than 20 miles per hour, and while hunting seals, they can leap completely out of the water—a feat known as leaping—resulting in successful captures of great whites 40 to 55 percent of the time, depending on lighting and other variables.

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