

Ten steps to reducing liability at your aquatic facility

Written by Maria Bella, AFOIT, CPOI, LGI

Well run swimming pools are an attractive amenity that can dramatically increase revenue. Improperly run aquatic facilities will increase liability instead, and an overlooked hazard can lead to tragedy.

Following is a list of ten commonly overlooked items that are easy to address, and when given proper attention, may save money on insurance costs, and will save lives.

1. Check barriers. Ensure that chain link hasn't been cut and that vertical rails in fencing are no more than four inches apart. Use a tape measure. Your eye may not detect $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of additional space, but that little bit of extra room may be all that a child needs to squeeze through and into your facility. Avoid ornamental fencing that has horizontal members, as children may find this tempting to climb. Likewise, do not position benches next to fences. This can give a climber just the boost needed to get up and over your fence. Make sure all gates open outward, are self-closing, and have latches installed out of the reach of children. If lifeguards aren't on staff at your facility, make sure that gates lock so that access is under your control.
2. Run in-service training with all staff regularly throughout the season. Emergency skills should be practiced in the environment in which they'll be used. Ensure that all rescue equipment is operational and, if you hire lifeguards, that all certifications are valid and up to date.
3. Make certain that signage meets code, is conspicuous and easy to understand. Measure water depth and check to make sure that depth markers are correct. Install the international "No Diving" symbol alongside each depth marker in shallow water. Place signage at emergency telephones that indicates to callers whether they should dial 911, 9-911, or just lift the receiver and listen for Emergency Services to respond. Post facility information (name, address, direct phone number, etc.) next to the emergency telephone.
4. Check your chemical stock. Call the Department of Agriculture to pick up chemicals that should be disposed of. Store fresh chemicals in their own containers or in new storage vessels. Do NOT combine chemicals to save storage space and do NOT store incompatible chemicals (i.e. chlorine and acid) in the same area. Check with your Fire Marshall to determine how much flammable material may be stored on-site. Make sure that fire extinguishers are the proper type for the application, and that emergency eye wash and emergency shower stations are flushed out. Update your MSDS manual.
5. Enlist experts for technical assistance with electrical and gas powered equipment. Have an aquatic safety expert review your facility's Emergency Action Plan and do a thorough site inspection each year. If diving boards, slides, chemical feed equipment or filtration equipment need service, contact the manufacturer for a list of certified service providers. Doing the work yourself could save money in the short term but may open you up to unnecessary liability.
6. Measure the length, width, and depth of each pool and calculate gallonage. Just as a doctor must know your weight to properly prescribe medicine dosages, you must also know how much water is in your pool to determine proper chemical dosages. Invest in a new test kit each year and read and follow ALL of the directions. Test the incoming water as well as the pool water so that you can anticipate the effect of fill water on pool water balance.

7. Visit the CDC's website at <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyswimming>. Review the *Fecal Accident Response Recommendations* and update your facility's procedures accordingly. Click on the *Health Promotions Materials* link and download brochures and posters for use at your facility. By educating your staff and the public, you can reduce the chance of disease transmission at your facility.
8. Contact the Department of Health, Department of Agriculture, and/or any other government agency for which you must maintain records. Ask for a copy of their report form. Use this as a basis for the records that you keep at your facility. Make sure that logs are filled out accurately and consistently. They may be your best defense if an incident leads to litigation. Train your staff on what to include and what to exclude on chemical test logs and incident reports. Facility records should be limited to facts; opinions should be saved for staff discussions.
9. Check outlets in each pool. Suction outlet (a.k.a. main drain) covers should be intact and securely fastened, but this alone may not be enough to prevent suction entrapment. For information on the *Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act*, go to <http://www.poolsafety.gov/vgb.html>. Also check inlets in each pool. Eyeballs on wall inlets should be angled to direct circulation towards dead spots. Floor inlets should not present a tripping hazard. Vacuum outlets should have self-closing covers, and grates should be free of cracks and chips that could result in injury. Skimmer covers, baskets, and weirs should be inspected for damage and replaced if necessary. A skimmer without a weir cannot function properly.
10. Ensure that flow meters, pressure and vacuum gauges are intact and properly installed. Replace gaskets or o-rings on pump strainers each year to ensure that lids seal tightly. Likewise, replace rubber parts on chemical feed equipment each year and inspect plastic parts for degradation due to chemical contact. Clean vent covers in chemical storage rooms and equipment areas. Ensure that air exchange rates meet standards for the types of chemicals that you have on hand, and that chemical storage room air is NOT vented into the pool area.

Maria Bella is an aquatic safety expert with more than 30 years of hands-on experience in the aquatics industry. She may be reached at 800-813-6736. She is one of only four Aquatic Facility Operator Instructor Trainers in the world and participates in several national standards writing committees, including The Association of Pool and Spa Professionals Technical Committee, the APSP-7 Committee on Suction Entrapment prevention, and the Model Aquatic Health Code Risk Management/Safety Technical Committee. This information provided is general and educational and not legal advice. For additional information, please visit www.hospitalitylawyer.com.

©Maria Bella 2009

1st print rights only