

Swimming Pool Safety

by Stephen Ruback, Professional Home Inspector, [TREC License #6030]

If you were to make a list of things around the house that are inherently unsafe, swimming pools would certainly be on that list. In spite of widely published warnings and high levels of general safety consciousness in our society, pool related injuries and deaths keep happening. With a bit of extra care and awareness, you can avoid adding names to the list. The focus on fun is an easy distraction from safety hazards.

There are the obvious behavioral risks like running on wet surfaces, excessive horseplay, use of glass items in the area, swimming alone, unsupervised children, inadequate swimming skills, etc. Using common sense around pools is always a good idea. Our focus on fun makes it is easy to overlook many dangerous physical conditions that often go unnoticed and uncorrected.

Water Condition

Keeping that water sparkling clean is a lot more important than just looking nice. Maintaining proper water chemistry helps preserve the pool surface and equipment, but more importantly, it stops the potential breeding and spread of disease. Germs, parasites and fungi love water, and only need a little encouragement to multiply. Dirt gives nasty stuff a place to grow and reduces the chlorine, which is there to kill germs, which are everywhere. Human bodies are filled with microorganisms looking for moist, friendly places. More bodies in the pool mean greater chlorine consumption. Chlorine naturally leaves the pool with time. Rain water dilutes it. It is consumed in the process of keeping the water safe. Systems using hydrogen peroxide operate with similar dynamics. Check your pool water chemistry often. Consult with your pool supply vendor for specific tests, test methods and frequency. Dirty water can be dangerous.

Trip hazards

Check the pool surfaces, edge materials and surrounding deck areas regularly for holes, cracks, and dislocations. Trip hazards can appear subtle until someone falls. Pools tend to be people magnets in the summer, and even if you are aware of every square inch, visitors may not be. I suspect that lawyers love pools.

Keep walkways clear of hoses, toys, pool tools and other moveable items. What might be considered minor obstacles in other places can become significant hazards around a pool.

Accessibility

As a pool owner you also have all kinds of legal liability for the results of others' misbehavior. It's up to you to keep the uninvited out of your pool. The entire area should be fenced with a barrier no lower than 4 feet high, with no more than a 2 inch bottom gap and less than 4 inches between vertical fence members – all in good repair. Gates should open outward, be self-closing, self latching [with the latch inside] and readily lockable.

When one side of the dwelling acts as a barrier wall, you need a powered safety cover; or all direct access doors are to be equipped with an automatic alarm that sounds throughout the house when the door is opened; or the doors must be self-closing and self-latching.

Finally, your barrier wall must not be easily climbed. Few pools meet these minimum requirements.

Electrical

Any electrical wires within 10 feet of a pool are a bad idea. If you have utility wires over the pool, be sure they are at least 22 feet above. More is better. While some communications type wiring may be allowed beyond ten feet above a pool, it's still a bad idea.

Beware of decorative lighting. Keep all electrical lights and fixtures at least ten feet way from the pool.

An outlet is supposed to be provided between 10 and 20 feet from the pool, protected by a GFI circuit. All electrical lines and connections should be protected by sealed conduit and appropriate fittings, rated for outdoor use. In your periodic inspection, make sure these are all properly connected. It is very common for one or more of these connection joints to be open, inviting disaster.

Motors and electrical equipment should all be properly grounded. This is a very common fault.

Heaters

The top of the heater is the outlet for the exhaust gasses from the gas burner. Those gasses are hot and toxic to breathe. That means it is not a good idea for a gas pool heater to be snuggled against a wall, near a window or tucked under a roof overhang.

Be sure there is a proper and functioning gas shut off valve at the heater. Check the gas lines for corrosion. If the heater does not work, or will not be used in the future, have the the gas line disconnected and a proper plug installed. Gas leaks are not usually much fun.

Slides and diving boards

Be sure any kind of slide or auxiliary equipment is securely installed and in proper working order. Corroded, loose, broken or missing parts are disaster's best friends.

Diving boards are no longer politically correct. Previous depth of pool guidelines no longer hold water, and the lawyers always win. Diving boards of any kind are now considered inherently unsafe and should be removed.

These are just a few highlights to help you get started. For a more detailed analysis of your specific situation, or when in doubt about any condition, consult a qualified professional. A thorough annual inspection of your pool and its surroundings is a bargain at twice the price, and the life you save could be your own.

Make your pool as safe as possible, then enjoy a happier summer.

By the way, new homes always need an inspection too. Be sure of what you are buying with a thorough home inspection, *before* you close the deal. You will save money and trouble in the long run.

Stephen Ruback is a licensed Professional Inspector; member of TAREI [Texas Association of Real Estate Inspectors] and HAR [Houston Association of Realtors]; approved by TREC [Texas Real Estate Commission] as a Professional Home Inspection Instructor.

In addition, he has earned a BS in engineering from Trinity University, is an author of several books and teaches a variety of self empowerment courses through Leisure Learning. For more information, he can be reached at 832-489-1071.