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10 THINGS +

Your Lifeguard Won't Tell You

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1. “This pool could sure use a few more of me.”

IN RECENT SUMMERS qualified lifeguards have been in high demand at pools, lakes, beaches and water parks across the country. But things are looking very different this year. “Everybody in the industry is cutting back,” says Patricia Roper, director of Seaside Aquatic Consulting, in Irvington, N.Y. For a dozen-plus municipal pools in Georgia, for example, that means shorter hours; elsewhere, Roper says, the number of lifeguards—who typically make an hourly wage of \$8 up to \$20 for well-trained beach guards—is getting slashed.

It’s bad news for lifeguards and swimmers alike. Though most states regulate the number of guards required per square foot of pool space or length of beach, many facilities and towns don’t comply, and the standards are rarely enforced, says Shawn DeRosa, an aquatics-safety consultant in Boston. And that can bring danger: In a September 2007 case, a Maryland jury found that inadequate staffing was one factor behind the drowning death of a five-year-old at a country-club pool. Only one guard was present, according to testimony—which isn’t considered adequate by most experts.

2. “My training wasn’t so hot.”

THEY MIGHT LOOK similarly chiseled on *Baywatch*, but not all lifeguards are equally well trained. The basic certification lifeguards earn from the American Red Cross or YMCA “is really just a learner’s permit,” says Tom Griffiths, at Penn State, who studies drowning. It’s meant to be supplemented with on-the-job training and safety drills, but he estimates about 25 percent of all guards get little or no follow-up, usually at places like country clubs and apartment pools. Others, like the roughly 12,000 guards working at beaches affiliated with the United States Lifesaving Association—which cover about 80 percent of the country’s oceanfront—go through continued rigorous training.

Connie Harvey, head of the Red Cross’s training program, says her organization always recommends lifeguards get regular training on the job, including special instruction in challenging environments like lakes and rivers. Jeff Ellis & Associates, a private firm that works with facilities including apartment pools, guarantees the quality of its guards and even has undercover staff audit them. Says Alison Osinski, an aquatics-safety consultant in San Diego, “It makes a huge difference.”

3. “You’re pretty safe—as long as the pool’s not too crowded.”

VISIBILITY IS A big issue for lifeguards, and not just in lakes and oceans. Safety experts are increasingly aware that guards have trouble seeing even in crystal-clear pools when crowded. That’s because many drowning victims sink to the bottom unnoticed—difficult to spot with others splashing around. Water-safety consultant Juliene Hefter calls it the ripple effect: “All that wave action distorts shapes under the water.” Guards can also suffer from “perceptual blindness,” meaning they’re so

focused on the water’s surface, they may not process something unexpected on the bottom.

The good news is that pools are taking the issue of visibility seriously. Lifeguards are now routinely shown training videos, teaching them to watch for something that may look as benign as a shadow below the surface. Technology is also playing a part—some 50 pools in the U.S. have paid about \$125,000 to outfit their facilities with Poseidon, a network of smart video cameras that detect unconscious swimmers on the pool’s floor within seconds. The price tag might seem high, Osinski says, “but it’ll never cost you what one drowning does.”

4. “You know, I’ve never actually rescued anyone.”

SAVING STRUGGLING swimmers might be in the job description, but that doesn’t mean the average lifeguard does it often. In fact, it’s not that unusual for a guard at a small pool to work four or five seasons and never have to save anyone, says DeRosa. Indeed, in a major study, culminating in the 1999 International Lifeguard Survey, 56 percent of American participants working at outdoor pools said they’d never fished someone out of the water. Lake, river and water-park guards had slightly more saves; 72 percent of beach-patrol guards had rescue chops.

Experts say that data still holds true, especially since U.S. drowning rates have held steady for the past decade—a fact that should concern people, says DeRosa, since “untested guards can develop a false sense of security.” But even being primed by experience is no guarantee of a good outcome. More than a quarter of guards surveyed who attempted to resuscitate a swimmer said the last person they helped died anyway. Experts speculate that the number is likely even higher. One bad experience like that for some lifeguards, says Osinski, “and they never come back.”

5. “I’m too immature for this job.”

HOW YOUNG IS too young to be a lifeguard? Many certification agencies will accept a 15-year-old. Osinski, who has investigated hundreds of drowning deaths over 40 years, says she’d like to see the minimum age raised to 18. There are no national statistics, but she says well over half the fatalities she’s investigated involved a teenage guard who froze up. What’s more, regardless of how teenage guards respond to a crisis, they tend to exaggerate their heroics. “This is a maturity issue,” Osinski says, which is important when talking about public-safety officers. “Think about it. Would you hire a 16-year-old to police your town?”

Young lifeguards can also have trouble being assertive. Most facilities urge adults to keep very young children within arm’s length while swimming, but “adolescents just aren’t equipped to do battle with noncompliant parents,” Griffiths says. According to the Centers for Disease Control, children ages 1 to 4 drown at a much higher rate than the rest of the population; when taking children to a pool, parents must realize they’re “taking them to a place that can and will kill them, and does so on a regular basis,” says Kevin Trapani, CEO of insurer The Redwoods Group.

6. “My skills are pretty rusty.”

HEADLIFEGUARDS keep their charges’ skills sharp with simulated rescue drills. But you’d be surprised how many are failing anyway. Even Ellis guards, who are usually tested between eight and 50 times a month (and so know to expect it), don’t do incredibly well. In 2008, when Ellis facilities did “dummy drops”—drills that place a lifelike mannequin at the bottom of a pool—more than one in five guards didn’t notice the doll within 10 seconds, the time Ellis views as acceptable. And Osinski estimates more than half the guards she’s seen tested fail such tests for other companies.

Richard Carroll, a senior VP with Ellis, says his company has drastically improved its guards’ scores in recent years by beefing up training standards; Ellis also puts any guard failing a test through professional retraining. Still, experts say, more regular testing is needed industrywide to improve safety. Concerned consumers should also insist their local lifeguards recertify annually, instead of every three years when their certificate expires, says Hefter, especially if a lifeguard works only during the summer. Otherwise, “their skills can get pretty rusty,” she says.

7. “I ought to have my eyes examined.”

LIFEGUARDS DEPEND on good eyesight, so you’d think the field would have pretty high standards for vision testing. Think again. Only a tiny portion of guards ever have their eyes checked, and when they do, the results can be startling. The Visual Fitness Institute, which focuses on athletes, tested guards working for Chicago-area pools back in 1995 and found that about one in five couldn’t pass a basic 20-30 vision test.

Chicago officials say they’re currently reevaluating that standard to decide whether it should be raised. Nationwide, though, low standards are pretty much the norm. Experts like DeRosa could cite no other aquatics employers who screen guards’ vision; Visual Fitness Institute founder Barry Seiller says the only similar program he has come across was for armed lifeguards doubling as peace officers in California state parks. And pool and waterfront managers gave him a “very chilly reception,” he says, when he recently floated the idea at a conference of requiring nationwide vision testing for all lifeguards. Still, the test clearly scared the Chicago guards into shape: Today only about 3 percent fail.

8. “I’m a terrific swimmer—but I need my floatie.”

ALTHOUGH OLD-school lifeguards scoff at the idea, safety gurus say the Ellis program has made pools safer, even with its heavy use of rescue tubes—the red car-bumper-shaped flotation devices often tucked under lifeguards’ arms. Ellis began promoting the device in the 1980s; today its certification program has guards use one both during the test and in actual rescues. “We use it sort of like a kickboard,” Carroll explains.

Carroll says the practice—which is now mimicked across the country—makes the water safer because it helps cut back on a major hazard: a guard being pulled under by a drowning swimmer. Still, critics see a downside. “We’ve basically

eliminated the need for lifeguards to be really good swimmers,” Hefter says. In some cases experts fear that could compromise water safety, especially if a guard hasn’t been trained in tube-free rescue techniques. In fact, one survey found that fewer than half of lifeguards said they were “very confident” they could do a rescue without one. But Carroll says the best swimmers aren’t always the best guards, especially because it’s vigilance, not swimming ability, that’s more often crucial.

9. “With this many kids, you’ll need more than just a lifeguard.”

MOST LIFEGUARDS think parents could do a better job watching Junior when they’re splashing around. But Mom and Dad could also do a lot toward preventing drownings by demanding that waterfronts and pools take extra safety precautions during high-risk events, experts say, when lots of kids are in the water. It could make a big difference. For instance, The Redwoods Group has found that three-fourths of the drowning deaths at YMCAs during the past 15 years happened during special events such as birthday parties or scouting-troop field trips.

So what to ask for? Redwoods CEO Trapani says his group estimates 70 percent of those deaths could have been prevented through “test, mark and float”: When guards test kids’ swimming ability before entry, mark the hands of nonswimmers and put them in life preservers. People tend to think such measures are prohibitively expensive, Trapani says. But he estimates a busy YMCA pool might need only about 25 preservers, roughly \$35 each. (YMCA facilities say they are working on getting enough lifejackets.) Want to go a step further? Demand that lifeguards watch swim-team practices—especially since coaches are rarely certified lifesavers.

10. “I’m making this pool into my science project.”

HERE’S A JOB not to offer a teenager: handling dangerous chemicals. But that’s what many guards end up doing. With only 20 states requiring managers of aquatic facilities to be trained to handle pool chemicals like chlorine, guards often get put in charge of monitoring and adding them.

But other public-safety issues come into play when pool chemicals are left to untrained folks like lifeguards. A recent study in Nebraska found that pools not required to be maintained by licensed operators were twice as likely to have problems with their chlorine or chemical balance. That’s alarming, since giardia, a parasite causing diarrhea, and hepatitis A both thrive in pools without proper chlorine balance. Those illnesses and others have become such a problem that the CDC reported 40 outbreaks of waterborne illness in U.S. recreational swimming areas in 2006, almost triple the number from a decade before. What extra precautions can you take this summer? Simple test strips available at most hardware stores can indicate the pH level, alkalinity and chlorine in the water. Pools with UV sanitation systems offer extra protection. 📍