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Water Quality & Health Council

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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WATER QUALITY &
HEALTH COUNCILSM

A 2009 public survey found a large percentage of Americans (47%) admit to unhygienic behaviors in public pools, including “peeing” in the pool (17%) and foregoing showering before swimming (35%). The survey also found that the majority of Americans (84%) believe their fellow swimmers engage in unhygienic behaviors at public swimming pools.

These survey data are relevant as researchers work to understand the complex chemistry of swimming pools, including chemical interactions between swimming pool disinfectants and organic compounds introduced into pool water by swimmers. Substances in urine and perspiration, for example, are known to react with chemical disinfectants to form disinfection byproducts, which have been variously associated with potential health effects.

LaKind, Richardson, and Blout (2010) discuss the need to protect swimmers from pathogens in pool water while minimizing their exposure to disinfection byproducts. They postulate that a greater public awareness of the health risks associated with unhygienic swimmer practices may help modify these behaviors. The survey data summarized below (Table 1) do not enable a quantitative assessment of the impact of such behaviors on the water quality of a specific pool. The data that are offered here do provide one measure of the extent of these unhygienic practices, which may be instructive as pool operators consider how to protect the health of swimmers.

The survey was commissioned by the Water Quality & Health Council, an independent, multidisciplinary group of public health and consumer experts sponsored by the Chlorine Chemistry Division of the American Chemistry Council. The survey was conducted electronically between April 30 and May 3, 2009, using a sample of 1,000 U.S. adults and the field services of TNS Omnibus. Results were weighted to reflect the adult population based on U.S. Census figures, including age, gender, geographic region, household income, and household size. The margin of error for the study was ± 3.1 percentage points at 95% confidence.

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Table 1 Percentage Responses to the Following Question: Which, if any, of the Following Do You Believe People Do in a Public Pool? Have You Ever Done any of the Following in a Public Pool?

	Believe Other Swimmers Are Doing	Have Done
Any of the following	84%	47%
Urinate/pee	78%	17%
Bring food into the pool	35%	4%
Bring drinks into the pool	40%	12%
Swim when ill with diarrhea	38%	1%
Swim with a runny nose	69%	11%
Swim with an exposed rash or cut	65%	7%
Skip the shower before swimming	73%	35%
Wear a dirty bathing suit	56%	5%
Fail to report that their infant or toddler has pooped in their diaper/bathing suit while in the pool	62%	*
None of these	2%	48%
Don't know	14%	5%

Note. Multiple responses were allowed for both questions.

Reference

- LaKind, J.S., Richardson, S.D., Blount, B.C. (2010). The good, the bad, and the volatile: Can we have both healthy pools and healthy people? *Environmental Science Technology*, 44 (9): 3205–3210.