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(800) 826-0826
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People with an Ostomy Using Pool Facilities Frequently Asked Questions

Below are frequently asked questions that have been directed to United Ostomy Associations of America, Inc. (UOAA) concerning people with an ostomy who wish to swim in a public or private water facility. This document confirms that people living with an ostomy should be welcomed and treated as a normal aquatic facility user.

What is an ostomy and why is it needed?

People living with an ostomy have undergone life-saving surgery to remove their bladder or part of their bowel. They have a surgically-created opening (stoma) in their abdomen for the discharge of waste and a prosthetic 'pouching system' is continuously worn over the stoma to replace the lost functions of storage and elimination. There are a variety of reasons why an individual may need an ostomy including living with colorectal cancer, bladder cancer, Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, birth defects, and other intestinal or urinary medical conditions. They are also necessary in cases of severe abdominal or pelvic trauma as a result of an accident including those sustained during military service. There are over 750,000 people in the United States with an ostomy.

Can people with an ostomy go swimming?

Yes. According to the Wound Ostomy and Continence Nurses Society (WOCN) and the American College of Surgeons, a person with an ostomy should be able to resume full activity after their surgical healing period. All over the world ostomates are living normal active lifestyles including participating in sports, cycling, running in marathons, mountain climbing and most definitely swimming including going into hot tubs. A stoma is NOT an open wound, so having an ostomy is no reason to stop these activities.

What measures does a person with an ostomy take to maintain a good seal on their pouch before swimming?

People with ostomies work closely with medical clinicians to ensure they have the best-fitting appliance for their individual body, and know how to properly apply it to prevent leakage. Depending on the individual, they may opt to use a variety of supportive accessories such as reinforcing the skin barrier with waterproof tape, pouch covers and ostomy support belts to enhance the security of their pouch.

What are the chances of a pouch leaking?

Ostomy pouching prosthetic systems are clinically-proven products that are engineered to prevent any leakage and provide a waterproof barrier. Experts at ConvaTec note the risk of having an appliance fall off in water is extremely small. Most adhesives have been designed to not only be secure in water, but also bond more tightly to the skin when exposed to water.¹ Individuals with stomas are far less likely to cause contamination than are those adults or children who are unable to hold their urine or stool.² In terms of contamination prevention, a swim diaper is vastly inferior to any pouching product for an ostomy.² Lastly, according to subject-matter experts at the Center for Disease Control (CDC) Division of Healthcare Quality Promotions Public Health, as long as the collection bag is leak-free and water-proof and the seal is strong and intact, exposure to fecal material by other swimmers should not be a concern.³

What happens if an ostomy pouch leaks?

Should the rare possibility of a pouch leak occur, the certified pool operator would treat the water using the facility's normal standard operating procedures or pool contingency plan, which typically follow CDC guidelines. There are no special requirements for this type of user.

What's the final word?

People living with an ostomy should be welcomed and treated as a normal facility user. No owner or operator of a private residential or public facility should prohibit a person with an ostomy from using the pool. The contamination risk from people with an ostomy who use a proper pouching medical device is insignificant compared to the potential contamination by children, potty-trained or otherwise.² Operators simply need to make their staff aware that these individuals need to be treated appropriately and sensitively.⁴ According to American Disabilities Act (ADA) specialists, being denied access to swimming pools is discriminatory and these individuals are protected under the ADA and Fair Housing Act. In conclusion, access to water recreation facilities for ostomates is just a matter of education, sensitivity and awareness, not special conditions or rules.⁴

References:

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2. "People with an Ostomy Using Public Swimming Pools Frequently Asked Questions." *MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY OFFICE OF DRINKING WATER AND MUNICIPAL ASSISTANCE ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS* (2014): n. pag. *www.michigan.gov*. Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. Web. 24 May 2016. <https://www.michigan.gov/documents/deq/Ostomy_and_Pool_Use_07-14_462443_7.pdf>.
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4. "Access to Sport and Recreation Opportunities for People Using a Colostomy Bag." *Www.bcass.org.uk 'Pool Rules' Poster* (n.d.): n. pag. *www.stomadata.com*. Institute of Sport and Recreation Management/National Association of Sports Development. Web. 24 May 2016. <http://www.stomadata.com/ISRM_Information-1-.pdf>.