



Recall of pool drain covers could mean holiday pool closings

By Laurie Ure, CNN

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Washington (CNN) -- A government agency is advising thousands of public swimming pools around the United States that they should not open this Memorial Day weekend because of concerns over potentially deadly drain covers.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) Thursday announced a recall of about 1 million pool and spa drain covers saying they "could pose a possible entrapment risk to swimmers and bathers."

CPSC Chairman Inez Tenenbaum advised that public pools and spas currently using the affected drain covers be closed until the facilities are brought into compliance with the law.

"I know this is a very difficult message for many communities to hear so close to Memorial Day weekend, but we cannot risk a child becoming entrapped in a recalled drain cover," Tenenbaum said in prepared remarks for an appearance at an aquatic center in Chula Vista, California.

Pool drains contain up to about 500 pounds of vacuum force, industry experts say. Poorly designed covers can trap swimmers -- especially young children. In some incidents, victims have been disemboweled and have died.

Tenenbaum especially urged operators of public kiddie pools, wading pools and in-ground spas to "respond immediately to this call."

Pools with multiple drains or gravity drainage systems do not have to replace their covers, Tenenbaum said.

CPSC Public Affairs Director Scott Wolfson said the drain covers were determined to be incorrectly certified after a CPSC investigation revealed that three laboratories did not use proper protocols during the certification process. The recalled drain covers were incorrectly rated to handle the flow of water through the cover, the CPSC said.

The agency said multiple manufacturers collectively affected agreed to a voluntary recall, and will repair or replace the covers as necessary.

The CPSC, an independent government agency created in 1972, has the authority to enforce the recall and pool closures, if necessary, Wolfson said.

Between 1999 and 2010, 97 suction entrapment incidents were reported, 12 of which resulted in death, according to the CPSC. Eighty-two injuries were reported in that same time period.

However, the agency notes that since 2009, no child has died in the United States as a result of drain entrapment.

Advocates say the recall is long overdue, and some complain it falls short of the mark.

Rep. Henry Waxman, D-California, chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said he is relieved the makers of the affected drain covers have agreed to a recall, but questioned why it took until now despite his first urging the CPSC to look into the issue last August.

"I wish industry would have stepped up to the plate sooner and not drawn CPSC into full-scale investigation when it was pretty clear early on there were problems with the ratings for these drain covers," Waxman said in a statement.

Paul Pennington with the non-profit Pool Safety Council told CNN his group had conducted numerous tests with various drain covers. He told CNN he sent the CPSC 73 e-mails since 2008 warning about the testing of the drains listed in Thursday's recall.

"I actually went to the CPSC's office and said, 'Look at this. This can't possibly be right. These drain covers cannot have passed the drain cover testing,'" Pennington said.

Pennington said the CPSC determination that pools with more than one drain need not replace their covers is "nonsense."

"Pools with two improperly covered drains pose twice the danger," Pennington said.

The CPSC's Wolfson said the agency looked at the covers in single and double-drain situations, and decided to "take the most precautionary approach that we can, but also be sensible."

"We would never make a decision of when a product should be or shouldn't be recalled if the safety of a child was at risk," Wolfson said.

Pamela Gilbert, former executive director for the CPSC, told CNN the multiple-drain issue is "extremely confusing."

"The drain covers, according to the law, are supposed to comply with the standard," Gilbert said.

Gilbert is also concerned about the timing of the announcement being so close to Memorial Day weekend, especially given how long the CPSC has known about the problem.

"I'm afraid some pools won't close down that ought to," Gilbert said.

Pennington said that some of the drain-cover related deaths occurred despite several strong adults desperately trying to pull victims off the covers.

Parents who have been successful in prying their child off the errant drains succeeded in doing so by wrapping their hands around the child, wedging their fingers between the victim and the drain, and rolling the child off of it, Pennington said.

"Keep children away from the drain, period," Pennington said.