

OREGON PUBLIC HEALTH DIVISION INFORMATION BULLETIN

INTERPRETATION MANUAL

POOLS/SPAS/FEEDING INFANTS



QUESTION:

Can a mother breastfeed her child in a public swimming pool or the swimming pool area?

BACKGROUND REGARDING BREASTFEEDING:

The Oregon Health Authority promotes breastfeeding as the standard way to feed infants. The health benefits are significant for both babies and mothers, and breastfeeding also decreases health care costs.

Oregon legislators enacted a law in 1999 which states:

“A woman may breast-feed her child in a public place.” (ORS. 109.001)

This law does not have any qualifications about mothers covering up or being discrete when breastfeeding. The law does state that mothers may breastfeed in all public places, but it does not provide direction regarding environments that may not be suited for breastfeeding because of potential harm to the infant.

BACKGROUND REGARDING SWIMMING POOL REGULATIONS:

For safety reasons, OAR 333-060-0215 and OAR 333-062-0175 require the pool operator to post rules and enforce that no food or drink be allowed inside the pool area or inside the pool or spa's required deck area. Glass or plastics that will shatter are also prohibited.

Oregon public swimming pool rules have prohibited food and drink in the pool area since the early 1940's. Other states can track that prohibition even into the late 1800's, when health regulations first addressed public pools. Since that time more has become known about the risks and benefits of public bathing and the benefits of proper water treatment. Even so, there are disease-causing organisms which are very resistant to chlorine disinfection. Two of the most resistant are *Cryptosporidium* and *Giardia*. According to the CDC:

- *Cryptosporidium* is the fastest growing cause of waterborne disease in public pools.¹
- Swallowing contaminated water can cause recreational water illnesses (RWIs), such as diarrhea and viral meningitis.²
- Swallowing larger volumes of water while in the pool can cause hyponatremia.²

The CDC has also stated:

“In pools or hot tubs/spas, your baby might be exposed to germs in the water and water temperatures that might be too different from your baby's normal body temperature. No scientific study has looked at

the health and safety of breastfeeding babies while in pools or hot tubs/spas. So, the issue of breastfeeding babies in pools or hot tubs should be considered based on the information currently known... CDC is not aware of any risks to other swimmers related to breastfeeding in pools or hot tubs/spas.²

There is also a possible risk of an infant getting splashed in the face while breastfeeding and possibly aspirating water.

¹ Hlavsa MC, Roberts VA, Anderson AR *et al.* Surveillance for waterborne disease outbreaks and other health events associated with recreational water — United States, 2007–2008. MMWR 2011;SS-60(12):1–37.

² U.S. Centers for Disease Control.- <http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/swimming/pools/breastfeeding-in-pools.html>

INTERPRETATION:

- 1. The Oregon Health Authority (OHA) will allow breastfeeding in a public swimming pool or required deck area at the mother's discretion.** Any other food or drink are prohibited in the pool, including *bottles of breast milk, infant formula or milk*.
- 2. The OHA will allow bottle feeding of breast milk, infant formula or milk to babies and small children in the required pool deck area, but not in the pool. The bottle cannot be glass or shatterable plastic.** In the event of a spillage, the pool operator or manager should be notified so the area can be kept clean. Only breast milk, infant formula or milk are allowed.
- 3. The OHA does not recommend immersion of infants in spas.** Exposure to the temperatures found in many public spas can be a health hazard. Infants / small children quickly overheat; especially in water temperatures above 101 to 102°F (38°C). Even larger children and some adults can have overheating problems (Pregnant women can significantly increase the risk of some fetal birth defects by immersing in spa water that is too hot).

Spas usually contain more contaminants, bacteria, disinfectant byproducts and chemicals than the swimming pool. **Sit on the spa's edge if you desire, but don't take the child into the water.**

POOL OPERATORS:

This is a good opportunity to educate staff and patrons!

- **Breastfeeding an infant or small child is acceptable (by law) in the swimming pool and swimming pool area.**
- **Breastfeeding is not recommended in a public spa because the high temperature presents risks to the infant.** Take the opportunity to educate the mother and other parents on the risks of exposure to high temperature water.
- **Do not ask a breastfeeding mother to move, cover up, be more discrete, or refrain from breastfeeding for any reason except safety.** If another bather complains, consider this an opportunity to share information about the law with the person complaining.

Discuss this issue with all pool staff so they are knowledgeable about this issue and understand how to respond to complaints. This subject matter has the potential to be embarrassing to some staff so discussing the policy of the pool, even role playing, may help staff to feel more comfortable dealing with the topic and providing this information to the public.