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HOME WORK: Staying out of too-hot water

Gary Dymski

Home Work

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It was days before the baby girl would turn a year old, and her grandmother was giving her a bath. The phone rang. Grandma took but a minute to answer the call.

In that instant, the baby from an Atlanta suburb tried pulling herself up using the hot-water handle on the tub faucet. The faucet opened, and she was scalded by 140-degree water, resulting in third-degree burns over most of her body. After being airlifted to a hospital, she died less than a week later.

"That story just got to me," says Meri-K Appy, president of the Home Safety Council, which recently released results of a survey on injuries from hot tap water. "After the survey results, I guess I'm surprised that more accidents don't happen. It's amazing how so few of us think about being burned by our tap water."

According to a study by Kelton Research on behalf of HotStop (a maker of antiscalding products) and the national nonprofit Home Safety Council, about 3,800 injuries and 34 deaths occur in the home annually because of scalding from hot tap water.

Nearly 80 percent of the parents surveyed said they have not checked their water heaters for a safe temperature setting (120 degrees F).

It's an oversight, of course. Who would think household tap water could be so harmful, even deadly? Certainly not that Georgia grandmother in 2002.

Appy says that's one of the problems. It's something most of us never think about. "One way to reduce the risk is to simply adjust the thermostat on your water heater," Appy says. "Most heaters have adjustable thermostats, and dialing it down to 120 degrees can prevent some of these accidents."

Studies show that tap water at 140 degrees can burn skin in just seconds. At 120 degrees, burning can take up to five minutes.

Most prone to scalding are infants and older adults, whose skin often is softer. In addition to lessening the risk of scalding, lowering the water heater thermostat from 140 degrees to 120 degrees can save almost 70 percent on water heating costs.



It is important that hot tap water be set at 120 degrees to eliminate bacteria. After dialing down the temperature, test the water with a candy thermometer. If necessary, adjust the thermostat again to maintain hot water at 120 degrees.

Appy says other minor steps also can be taken, including running the cold water before turning on the hot water.

"I know a lot of us are used to turning on the hot water first, then adjusting the temperature at the faucet by turning on the cold water," she says. "Just do it the other way around, so the hot water doesn't rush out."

Other safety tips:

Test tub water using your own skin. Reach into the water up to your elbow before placing the child into the tub. If the water is too hot for your forearm, it will be too hot for the child.

Keep children within arm's reach when they're bathing. Never leave them alone.

Even when using the tub, turn on cold water first, then adjust tap temperature by turning on the hot water.

The tap-water study also showed that only 4 percent of adults surveyed had installed an antiscald device.

"That was very surprising," Appy says, "because many of the new devices are inexpensive and can be easy to install."

While it does not commonly endorse products, Appy says the Home Safety Council is encouraging installation of HotStop antiscald faucets, tub spouts and showerheads.

Available at Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse stores (for between \$24 and \$39), these devices can be easily installed by the average adult - how hard is it to hand tighten a new shower head? - and will instantly reduce the flow of water to a trickle when it reaches unsafe temperatures.

The devices also are available at h2otstop.com.

"It's so easy, and in this case inexpensive, to prevent scalding," Appy says. "The main thing about the survey, however, is how few of us are aware of the dangers."

To review survey results, visit HomeSafetyCouncil.org.

SAFETY IN THE MIX

On Long Island, it's not uncommon for domestic water to be heated by a coil on a gas- or oil-fired boiler. When a hot-water faucet is turned on, the coil furnishes hot water. The danger is that this hot water can be unbelievably hot.

"Under the latest building codes, a mixing valve is required on the system to keep the domestic hot water from being so hot," says Ed Schoen of Prestige Heating Service in Massapequa. "But there are many older boilers in service that do not have this valve."

Schoen says many boilers also might have a manual mixing valve, but these are not reliable. Installing an automatic version can run \$250 to \$350 and will prevent scalding tap water.

Check with a plumber or oil-heat technician the next time your boiler is being serviced.

- GARY DYMSKI

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