

[Back to Article](#)

Change to pool rules means less time for kids to cool off

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Parents are unhappy that Ontario's new water treatment guidelines could mean less pool time for their kids.

According to the change, wading pools, which contain non-circulated water, have to be drained and refilled every four hours.

That means facilities that are normally open for five hours either have to drain and refill their water for an extra hour of use or shut down an hour earlier, Councillor Paula Fletcher said.

She has asked the province to take a second look at the guidelines, which she says have caused the city to close about half of its wading pools an hour earlier each day.

At Leslie Grove Park, where temperatures soared to 31C on Sunday afternoon, parents struggled to understand the shorter hours.

"I've never noticed anything dirty in this pool and I've been coming here since I was young," said Alyshia Williams, who stood in the wading pool to escape the heat while watching her niece play. "It's a good way for the kids to be outside and cool off a bit."

Toronto has more than 100 supervised wading pools. Splash pads are popular in other parts of the GTA.

The guidelines were issued to "assist in the prevention and reduction of water-borne illness" and reduce the risk of contaminated water, a document from the province says.

A Ministry of Health spokesman said no one was available Sunday to explain the guidelines further. A city spokesman said no one from Public Health was available for comment.

Although the guidelines are meant as recommendations, the city traditionally follows them in the absence of binding regulations, said Councillor Fletcher, a member of the board of health.

"The city can't just ignore it, but the city can advocate and say, 'Can we have some flexibility in applying it?'"

On top of asking the ministry to reconsider the guidelines, Fletcher has asked Public Health to review how it is implementing them.

"It just seems rather arbitrary that (the province) came up with this four-hour cut-off," Fletcher said. "In our experience, we have pools open for five hours and there haven't been major problems."

City staff monitor chlorine levels in all of Toronto's wading pools hourly, Fletcher said. Soiled or cloudy water may be partially or completely drained and refilled.

"It's very clear that the city already has very stringent testing for wading pools," she said. "I think this (recommendation) needs to go back to the drawing board and be refined a little bit to be based more on real life."

Lisa Brooke regularly takes her four-year-old to Hideaway Park's wading pool, which used to be open five hours a day starting in the late afternoon.

"It's definitely set up to accommodate working parents," she said. "I already find that most of the pools are hit-or-miss in terms of when they're open. Once you get a schedule that works, it hurts to lose an hour."



Two-year-old Andrew Macwilliam, of Oakville, cools off with in the wading pool at Sir Casimir Gzowski park Sunday.

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Brooke said she's glad the province wants to ensure the water quality is good but, "It's one hour. Let the kids have it."