by Jim Stover

When it comes to guestroom hot water, how hot is hot enough?

The late-night call from a client related a horrifying tale. A guest had fallen asleep in the bathtub and suffered second- and third-degree burns over the entire lower half of his body. This gentleman was a paraplegic and literally had no feeling below his waist. The investigation revealed he had consumed several drinks at the hotel bar and had then retired to his room. After entering the tub and opening the water faucets, he fell asleep. The water temperature at the faucet was measured by the engineering department at 140 degrees Fahrenheit.

Was this a bizarre, one-of-a kind accident? Perhaps; but a recent survey conducted by Powers™, a supplier of water tempering technology, revealed some rather shocking information. Of the rooms surveyed, nearly 90% had scalding water at the guestroom taps.

"Dangerously high water temperatures are being delivered to most hotel rooms nationwide," stated Bruce Fathers, Powers™ director of marketing. "Travelers are especially at risk because they're in an unfamiliar setting. Many shower valves, particularly those with volume control, can be opened in the full-hot position."

Of the guestrooms surveyed, 89.4% delivered hot water at the shower in excess of 115 degrees F; over half (57.5%) had water in excess of 125 degrees F; 16% of the hotel rooms surveyed delivered water in excess of 140 degrees F. As a point of reference, at 140 degrees F, it takes only 5 seconds to sustain a third-degree burn, while 130 degree F water will cause third-degree burns in as little as 30 seconds. Water at 120 degrees F will cause third-degree burns in ten minutes. The recommended temperature for guestroom hot water is 110 degrees F, which results in third-degree burns after ten hours exposure.

Hotels are heavily engaged in marketing their products to ensure the highest levels of occupancy and rate. As we know, amenities have crept to the point where we all expect – and demand – the highest quality terry and linens, flat-screen TV's, multiple pillows, and the most comfortable of beds. General managers interviewed for this article are almost unanimous in insisting that their guest satisfaction scores – and a large part of their bonuses – are tied to the speed and temperature of the hot water delivered to the guestrooms. When informed that the Consumer Products Safety Commission estimates 2,600 scald injuries per year are caused by excessively hot water, and water scald injuries are severe and sometimes fatal, there is a definite "not in my hotel" mentality.

As part of my methodology for conducting loss control audits, and even when staying at a property and not conducting an audit, I measure the water temperature at the guestroom taps. My admittedly unscientific survey mirrors that of Powers™. The typical hotel delivers water at too great a temperature to the guestrooms. This is not only unsafe, it is unwise. Google "scalding water" and you will receive over 772,000 hits on this topic, many of them plaintiff attorneys' websites. The American Trial Lawyers (ATLA) website has a most disturbing article on scaldings, which concludes with the chilling statement: "Please contact us if we can be of further assistance."

As a frequent traveler who spends over 100 nights per year in hotels, I think I can safely speak for my peers when I say that hot water that is too hot is *not* perceived as an amenity but as a danger. Turning down the water temperature at the hot water heaters will not only provide a safer environment for the guest, it will save the hotel money on energy. Since the green movement is gaining momentum, why not market the reduced temperatures as good for the environment and safer for the guest?

Regardless of the circumstances, I would not wish to be a general manager dealing with a scalded guest, much less a child. The solution appears to be a win-win issue. Reduce the temperature, reduce expense, and increase safety. ✧

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Did you know?

Immersion time it takes an adult to incur third-degree burns from hot water:

156° F	=	1 second
149° F	=	2 seconds
140° F	=	5 seconds
133° F	=	15 seconds
127° F	=	60 seconds
124° F	=	180 seconds

Source: Kent Fire/King County Fire District, Washington