

How to avoid getting soaked while repairing your pool.

The following information was comprised from various sources such as the Better Business Bureau, consumer advocate groups, and government web sites. It is intended to be used as a guide only, but if followed will greatly increase the likelihood of hiring a competent contractor.

Pennsylvania's Home Improvement Consumer Protection Act.

As of July 1st 2009 the Home Improvement Consumer Protection Act (HICPA) goes into effect. This law requires contractors to register with the Bureau of Consumer Protection of the Pennsylvania Attorney General (the Bureau) and mandates the form and content of contracts. All contracts over \$500 must include the contractor's registration # or the contract is not valid. Go to www.attorneygeneral.gov/ to check up on any contractor that has registered and avoid all non registered contractors.

Avoid companies that are way below the average price.

If the price is extremely low and "it sounds too good to be true" it probably is. If it is substantially lower than everybody else, they are probably cutting corners somewhere and it may not be apparent for weeks or months, long after they are gone. Very often those with the lowest prices also have the highest complaints. Some of these companies will require the customer to needlessly spend almost \$1000 extra for water delivery, when it is not required.

Remember - it is always better to pay a little more than not enough!

Never pay for an estimate!

If you're asking a pool company to travel outside their normal territory you can understand a nominal charge for the **extra** travel time. Other than that, paying for an estimate is almost unheard of in the pool industry. There are more than enough companies that will gladly give you a free estimate; you don't need to pay for it. Also it is common knowledge that you should **always get three estimates before choosing a contractor.**

Do not pay cash, if a contractor demands it.

There is nothing wrong with paying cash if **you** prefer it and the contractor is willing to give you a signed company receipt. But this is **never** acceptable if the contractor insists on it. This is a warning sign! If you have a dispute, you can not prove that you have ever paid them. You see it on the news again and again where homeowners have given cash deposits and then they have **never** seen the contractor again.

Avoid the name game.

Many companies will change their name to avoid problems such as legal judgments, debts and creditors. But while the name may change (sometimes ever so slightly) the phone number may not. It is not unheard of for two or more companies to have the same owner, so your "3 different quotes" may be from the same person. Advertisements may remain almost identical and will not reflect their past history or the problems they are avoiding. Be very cautious if you're asked to make a check to either a person or a different company name. Use the following website to verify who the owner is, and that the company name is a legal business. <http://www.corporations.state.pa.us/corp/soskb/csearch.asp?corpsNav=>

Avoid the hard sell.

Never feel pressured to sign a contract on the spot! If they won't allow you time to think it over now, before you give them any money, how do think they will react to your questions and problems later. If you have been pressured, remember it is a Pennsylvania law that you have a "3 day right of recession" if you sign a contract in your house on the 1st visit. Of course this means nothing if you give them a cash deposit without a receipt.

Promising unrealistic dates?

Many companies will promise, even lie, giving you an unrealistic completion date, just to get the job. **Unfortunately, once they have your deposit there is little you can do but wait. You are at their mercy.** This is hard to detect, but if most companies are saying 3-4 weeks in the middle of May and another company tells you next week, they may be lying to get the contract. One way to help prevent this is to have a written completion date, **with penalties for not meeting this date**, on the contract. If the contractor is lying they are not likely to put that clause on the contract.

Please see other side

Avoid pool companies that use pool subcontractors.

Lets face it almost everybody uses subcontractors to some extent, it helps keep the costs down. But if you have a problem with the pool repair, and that work was done by a sub-contractor, everybody starts to point fingers and you are left with the bill. Also be sure to get a copy of the insurance policy for all subcontractors, many have no insurance at all. That means if someone gets hurt, it goes against your home owners policy.

Never sign an insurance check over to a contractor unless the job is completed and you are 100% satisfied.

If you give away the check before the job is completed, you loose all of your leverage for getting the job finished correctly. The insurance company will not help you, and you cannot cancel the check. This is most important when starting the job as some contractors will have you sign a release to have the insurance company pay them directly. When you do this you loose all control of the money.

Use companies that take credit cards.

This is true for any service, not just the pool repair industry. If you have a problem, and charged the service, you can file a dispute and the credit card company will act on your behalf and hold off paying the contractor and try to help resolve your issues. This does not mean that you have to use a credit card to pay for the job, but a company that takes credit cards is more likely to have fewer problems.

Avoid unreasonable deposits.

Most repairs and renovations typically require a 50% deposit. If a contractor "wants" more, he is getting enough up front, (sometimes more than other companies charge for the whole contract) so he can walk away at anytime, regardless of the condition of the job. If they "need" more they may be in financial problems. Either way something is wrong, and you should stay away. Under the new Consumer Protection Law it states that "for a contract of more than \$1,000, the contractor cannot accept a deposit in excess of 1/3 of the contract price, or 1/3 of the contract price plus the cost of special order materials."

Be cautious of warranties that are out of the industry norm.

According to most manufacturers, the average replacement age for a liner is 8 – 12 years. And the typical labor warranty is 1 year. Some expanded or extended warranties are legitimate; ask to see all warranties before signing any contract. If an contractor will not show you the warranty in writing prior to signing the contract they should not be trusted.

P.O. Box is the only address available.

Companies that have **only** a P.O. Box for an address may have something to hide. If they cancel their P.O. Box you have no way of finding them. This does not mean they have to have a store front, many great companies have a P.O. Box, but without a real address, your odds of resolving a problem may be less.

Call your local store, distributor, or manufacturer for referrals.

No one wants to refer you to a disreputable contractor or company; they would rather refer you to no one at all. Call around and see whose name comes up often (in a good way) and whose name does not get referred to that much or at all. This should be a good indicator of the reputation they have in the industry.

Inexperienced employees?

Be cautious of larger companies with a lot of inexperienced employees and a high turnover rate. Try to verify prior to signing any contracts that they use trained, qualified, employees—not an ever-rotating source of entry-level employees. Are their technicians certified and if so by whom? The better companies will send their employees to training seminars and continuing education classes to keep up to date on the latest technology.

Professional Trade Organizations & Certifications.

Professional trade organizations such as NESPA or APSP offer the consumer additional confidence by pre-screening their members. They also offer advanced training, certifications, & accreditations which ensure that their members have the knowledge to meet or exceed industry standards when they service your pool. If they do not service what they sell or are not an authorized service center for the manufacturers they represent, then you may want to look else where.

Do your homework, go online.

There are many websites to help you check out the company you plan on hiring. The most common one is the Better Business Bureau (www.bbb.org). They will (for free) tell you if your contractor has had any complaints in the last 3 years, how many, if and how they were resolved, and what they were for. Just because a company has "been in business" for XX amount of years, or is a BBB member does not mean they are good or reputable. **YOU have to do your homework!**