

The Desert Pool Owner's Weekly 5-Minute Check

Five things to look at once a week. One minute each. Plus the numbers your water should actually read — written by a commercial pool tech with 23 years on Las Vegas water.

Most pool problems are cheap and easy the week they start, and expensive a month later. You don't need to be a chemist to catch them — you need to look at the right five things and know what you're seeing. That's all this is.

PART ONE · THE FIVE-MINUTE WALK

1 The surface and the tile line

1 MIN

- LOOK FOR** Stand at the edge and look across the water, not down into it. You want to see the bottom clearly. Then run a finger along the tile at the waterline.
- GOOD** Bottom is sharp and clear. Tile feels smooth.
- WATCH IT** A dull or slightly cloudy look means something changed this week. A gritty or chalky ring on the tile is scale starting.
- ACT** Water you can't see the bottom through, or anything green or slick on the walls and steps.

Vegas note: our fill water is hard, and every gallon that evaporates leaves its minerals behind. In summer you can lose a quarter inch a day. That ring at the tile line is the desert doing its thing — catching it early is the difference between a wipe-down and a professional job.

2 The skimmer and the pump basket

1 MIN

- LOOK FOR** Open the skimmer lid. Empty the basket. If your pump is off and you know how to open it safely, check that basket too.
- GOOD** Some leaves and bugs. Water moving briskly through the skimmer opening.
- WATCH IT** A basket packed solid every week, or weak pull at the skimmer.
- ACT** The water level has dropped below the middle of the skimmer opening. Your pump can start pulling air, and that's how pumps get damaged.

Vegas note: after a monsoon blow, check this the same day. A single storm can load a basket with enough debris to starve the pump for a week.

3 The filter pressure gauge

1 MIN

- LOOK FOR** Find the round gauge on your filter and read the number. Write it down somewhere — a note on your phone is fine.
- GOOD** Close to what it read right after the last cleaning. That number is your baseline, and it's different for every pool.
- WATCH IT** Climbing steadily week over week. That's the filter loading up, which is normal and tells you when it's due.
- ACT** Well above baseline, or the water returning to the pool has clearly slowed down.

Vegas note: if you don't know your baseline, start it this week. One number written down beats any guess — and it's the first thing a good tech will ask you.

4 Test the water

1 MIN

- LOOK FOR** Test strips or a drop kit, both fine. Test away from the returns, elbow deep, not off the top. Compare what you get to the table on the next page.
- WATCH IT** Chlorine that reads fine on Monday and nothing by Friday. Something is eating it, and that's worth understanding before you just add more.
- ACT** Chlorine at or below 3 in warm water, no reading at all in any season, or a strong chlorine smell — that last one usually means the opposite of what people think. A pool that smells like chlorine is a pool telling you something is off.

Vegas note: stick a finger in and judge the water, don't check a calendar. Above about 75° you want headroom, because that's the season when one bad afternoon — wind, dust, a pool full of people — can eat your whole reading. Below 75° the water holds what you give it and 2 will ride out the winter.

5 Stand at the equipment and listen

1 MIN

- LOOK FOR** Just stand there for sixty seconds with the system running. Listen, then look at the ground.
- GOOD** A steady hum you recognize. Dry concrete underneath.
- WATCH IT** A new sound — grinding, screeching, rattling. A damp patch that wasn't there last week.
- ACT** Anything hot to the touch, any burning smell, any breaker that won't stay on. Shut it down and call someone.

Vegas note: equipment out here lives in 115° heat with no shade. It ages faster than the manual assumes. A noise that's new is worth a phone call — a noise you've ignored for a month is usually a replacement.

READING	NORMAL RANGE	WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS OUT HERE
Free chlorine	3 – 5 ppm above 75° 2 – 3 ppm below 75°	Warm water, carry 3 to 5 — and 3 is your warning light, not your target. Not because the pool needs 5 on a calm day, but because a windstorm Thursday shouldn't leave you at zero Friday. You're buying headroom against something happening. Cold water is different. Below about 75° a pool will sit at 2 all winter and hold — nothing is eating it and an event won't crash you nearly as fast.
pH	7.4 – 7.6	Drifts upward on its own. Our fill water pushes it up, and so does aeration from waterfalls and spa jets. Expect to be adding acid, not base.
Total alkalinity	80 – 120 ppm	Fill water here runs high, so watch the top of the range rather than the bottom. High alkalinity is what makes pH stubborn and hard to move.
Calcium hardness	200 – 400 ppm	You will almost never need to add calcium in Las Vegas. It climbs on its own as water evaporates and you top off. When it gets too high the only way down is new water — and that means draining the whole pool, not part of it.
Stabilizer (CYA)	30 – 50 ppm	You need it outdoors or the sun destroys your chlorine. But it only leaves with new water, and it creeps up every time you use tablets. Over 100 and you're draining — the whole pool, no exceptions.

The thing nobody tells homeowners

Chlorine and stabilizer are a pair. Stabilizer is sunscreen for your chlorine — without it, a Las Vegas afternoon burns most of it off. But too much of it handcuffs the chlorine you have. That's why a pool can test 3 ppm — right at the floor, looking fine on paper — and still turn green on you.

So the right chlorine number isn't fixed. These are the warm-water numbers — the more stabilizer you have, the more chlorine you need to carry:

STABILIZER 30–50

3 – 5

STABILIZER 60–80

5 – 7

STABILIZER 80–100

7 – 8

OVER 100

Drain

If you're up in that third column you're fighting the pool every week and losing. That's not a chlorine problem you can buy your way out of — the stabilizer has to come down, and new water is the only thing that does it.

Cold water buys you slack on all of this. Below 75° the sun isn't working against you and algae is barely trying, so you can run under these numbers and get away with it. Come spring, they matter again.

If you've been running tablets for a couple of seasons and your chlorine "stops working," test your stabilizer before you buy more chlorine. That one test has saved my customers a lot of money.

When I say drain, I mean drain it all.

Half-draining does not cut your stabilizer in half. It soaks into the plaster and comes right back at you. And if you are going to the trouble anyway, a full drain resets everything else in the same trip — dissolved solids, phosphates and your calcium hardness all start fresh. Drain part of it and you get a partial result on every one of them.

Two things before you pull the plug. If your pool is anything other than plaster, pebble or aggregate — a vinyl liner, or fiberglass — call a professional first. A liner can shrink while it is empty and not sit back down when you refill, and a fiberglass shell can move.

And an empty pool can lift or crack if the ground water is high or the soil is wet. Check your ground conditions and your local water rules, or have somebody do the drain who does it for a living.

Two things worth being careful about

- **Never open a filter that still has pressure in it.** Even a gauge reading zero can be wrong. There's a relief valve on top for exactly this reason — open it first, let it hiss until it stops, and confirm the pressure is actually gone before a single clamp comes loose. A filter lid under pressure can come off hard enough to seriously hurt someone. This is the one on this page that isn't about your pool — it's about you.
- **Never mix pool chemicals together, and never pour one on top of another.** Not in a bucket, not in the skimmer, not one right after the other in the same spot. Acid and chlorine together make a gas that can put you in the hospital. Add one thing, let the pump circulate, and come back later for anything else.

John Stoneman — 23 years servicing commercial and residential pools in Las Vegas. I built Code Blue because the same handful of small things go wrong on every pool, and almost all of them are cheap to catch and expensive to miss.

codebluepooltools@gmail.com

Questions about your pool? Send one.

This is general guidance for residential pool owners, based on field experience. Ranges are typical for outdoor residential pools and may differ for your equipment or surface — follow your manufacturer's instructions and product label directions, which always win over anything on this page. It is not a substitute for a licensed professional who can actually see your pool. If something looks wrong and you're not sure, stop and ask someone. © 2026 Code Blue Pool Tools.