

Can you really open a fire hydrant to cool off? - AvvoStories

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CRIME

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Kids cooling off in the spray of an open hydrant is an enduring image of urban summers, an activity depicted in countless movies and TV shows. Is the practice legal?

Not really. Opening a fire hydrant is as illegal as [parking](#) near one. But is there a way to go about it without a visit from the authorities? Depending on where you live, maybe. But looking at the legal specifics in a few cities makes it clear your options are limited:

New York

New York is a partial exception to the rule. It's illegal to open a fire hydrant in New York, with fines of up to \$1,000, imprisonment for up to 30 days, or both. However, any adult can call the fire department and ask to have a hydrant fitted with a free spray cap that will limit the hydrant's fire-fighting flow into a gentle and legal sprinkler.

Baltimore

In Baltimore, it is possible to obtain a permit to tap into hydrants to fill swimming pools and wash down construction sites, but not for cooling off. Illegally opening fire hydrants in Baltimore can result in up to six months of jail time and a \$500 fine.

Chicago

Even though Chicago gangs threaten violence over their spraying hydrants, it is not only against the law to open a hydrant in Chicago, it's illegal to even possess an unauthorized hydrant key. Illegal taking of city water is punishable by up to \$1,000 or 20 days' imprisonment for the first offence.

St. Louis

St. Louis takes a hard line against fire hydrant misuse. Not only is it illegal to open a hydrant, it is against the law to play in the spray if someone else has opened it. In fact, parents who allow their children to play in the water from an open fire hydrant can be fined \$1,000.

But why?

City governments are not trying to be bureaucratic killjoys—there are good reasons to keep hydrants closed, no matter how hot the weather. Spewing 1,000 gallons of water per minute onto city streets has obvious environmental consequences—especially at the time of year when municipal water supplies are lowest. Nearby buildings can suffer a loss of water pressure and open hydrants can impede the fire department's response to actual fires.

Open hydrants can also cause accidents. Children have been hit by cars when drivers' vision was obscured by the curtain of spray; and small children can be knocked over by the force of the water—at least one child died after the gushing stream pushed her into the path of an oncoming truck.

So take advantage of safer—and legal—ways to beat the heat, such as using garden hoses instead of fire hydrants, and visiting air-conditioned public libraries or the municipal swimming pool. Many cities even keep air-conditioned public buildings open 24/7 to serve as “cooling centers” during periods of excessive heat.

Tagged children, crime, safety

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