New Tank Cycling & Emergency Checklist

Freshwater aquarium quick reference

Cycling (fishless, 4-6 weeks)

Stage	Ammonia	Nitrite	Nitrate	Action
Day 1-10	Rising	0	0	Seed filter, dose starter bacteria, test 2×/wk
Day 10-25	Falling	Spiking	0	Keep feeding source (2 pinches flake), test 2×/wk
Day 20-40	0	Falling→0	Rising	Wait until 0/0 with nitrates present
Ready	0	0	Any	30-50% water change to <40 ppm nitrate, stock slowly

Weekly routine

☐ 25% water change (dechlorinated, temp-matched) ☐ Test ammonia/nitrite/nitrate/pH ☐ Feed only what's eaten in 2 min ☐ Wipe glass, rinse filter media **in old tank water** (never tap) ☐ Check equipment heat/flow

Emergency triage (first hour)

Sign	First move
Gasping at surface, several fish	Ammonia spike until proven otherwise: 50% water change + dechlorinator, stop feeding 24-48 h, add aeration
Cloudy white water, new tank	Bacterial bloom — do not scrub filter; test ammonia; wait 1-2 weeks
Green water	Light blackout 3 days + filter upgrade; reduce light under 8 h/day
White spots	Test params first; if water is 0/0/low — raise to 80-82°F slowly + treatment per species hardiness
Lethargic at bottom, one fish	Quarantine if possible; test all params; observe 24 h before medicating

Golden rule: test water before treating fish. Most "disease" is water quality.

Estimates only — verify with your own tax/finance professional or licensed contractors. Printed from our site, November 2026.