

Benefits of Open Water Swimming and How to Do it Safely

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Safety equipment:

If you are new to open water swimming, whether it be from the perspective of a training triathlete, an outdoor enthusiast, or even from the eyes of a competent and strong swimmer, the best and safest way to enjoy the benefits of open water swimming is by exploring your local options to find a well-managed open water swimming venue.

Well-managed open water swimming venues will offer you the peace of mind that your overall safety is being managed by a team of qualified open water lifeguards as well as taking all-important water microbiology water testing, giving you peace of mind that there is nothing nasty lurking in the water which may make you unwell.

Venues will take the time to ensure that all entry and exit points are clear of anything hidden under the water which may cut you, cause injury or cause you to slip and fall. There can often be hidden or submerged dangers under the water that cannot be seen from the surface, even in shallow water and your venue will work hard to ensure that any dangers have been removed.



Often, managed open water venues will offer you a safety briefing when you first come along to swim, making you aware of all the lake safety protocols, emergency meeting points and highlighting any potentially tricky areas to avoid (such as submerged weeds or sharp rocks), leaving you safe to enjoy your swim without any worry.

Open Water venues will also have heated changing rooms, toilets, first aid areas, showers and somewhere to lock any valuables away. This may seem like a luxury when exploring open water environments, but it also serves a very important purpose; environment conservation. In 2020, we saw a huge rise in people exploring open water options, both in managed venues and in 'wild' areas. Whilst as an open water swimming coach I enjoyed watching people exploring the open water environment, we also saw a lot of damage to the outdoors. This included trespass on private land, leaving rubbish behind, fires and BBQ's, using bushes as toilets, and without showering before entering the water, also bringing in contaminants such as perfumes, suntan lotion and bacteria into freshwater sources. As nice as it might feel getting 'back to nature', without education and care of how to treat the environment it is hugely damaging to the environment and could damage the natural flora and fauna of the water which many animals rely on to thrive. Managed open water venues educate about the damaging effects of this kind of behaviour whilst also working hard to protect water conservation.



The additional benefit of exploring open water swimming through a managed venue is that you will find lots of like-minded swimmers to talk to, offering tips and advice to help you improve your overall swimming technique and opening endless possibilities of making new friends and exercise buddies!

Like with any exercise, before you get started, you should consider your overall health and talk to your doctor if you have any concerns taking on new exercise routines.

Consider what you choose wear both in and out of the water. Loose fitting clothes in the water can cause drag and make you feel tired. Some people opt to wear a wetsuit which offers buoyancy and warmth when swimming outside, this is certainly advisable if you are new to open water swimming, but it is not essential. Many people enjoy swimming in the same swim wear they would wear in a swimming pool along with a brightly coloured swim hat for safety.

When you get out the water you will immediately feel cold and will continue to feel cold for some time after your swim, so you should consider bringing easy-to-put-on clothing that you can change in to quickly to help you warm up. Jogging bottoms, jumpers and a beanie hat are all inspired choices! Bringing along a warm drink and a sweet treat for after your swim will also help you warm up and replace any sugars you lost through exercise – it's a great excuse to eat a big bit of cake.



Key Benefits:

Swimming in the open water throughout the year is widely reported to have many benefits to both mind and body, from strengthening the cardio-respiratory system and immune system, helping to lose excess weight through the cooling of the body and then the rewarming process (thermogenesis), to increasing reproductive hormones for those looking to start a new family. Cold water swimming also improves the body's responses to stress, releasing endorphins which will help you relax, to sleep better and to feel calmer. The socio benefits to the swimmer is also a truly important one, with many swimmers feeling part of a community coupled with being outdoors which helps improve mental health, especially during the dark, cold months of winter.

Key Benefits of open water swimming:

1. Feeling Happy

Have you ever had a cold shower or bath and it made your skin sting a little? Swimming in cold water has a similar effect! Your brain will see this as a 'fight or flight' situation and will release endorphins (natural painkillers produced by your brain to protect your body and prevent shock). These endorphins will make you feel 'alive' and 'awake' when in the water, and when back on dry land will leave you feeling positive and accomplished all day long!

Being outdoors and meeting with like-minded people can also help us feel happy by feeling included and having a sense of community and shared ownership of challenge and experiences.



2. Gets the blood flowing

When our body gets cold, our arteries, veins, and capillaries contract, causing the heart to have to pump a little bit harder to get the warm blood around your body. Your heart will also want to beat faster to keep your vital organs warm and working well, it is like your own built-in central heating system!

When we regularly submerge in cold water, it will strengthen your heart and circulatory system, making it a great choice of exercise for overall health.

3. Get a good night's Sleep

When we consider the two above benefits; increased circulation and happy feelings, another hidden benefit will make itself known; better quality sleep.

Cold water submersion activates your parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) which is the key factor in creating a sense of relaxation and allowing the body to calmly relax into sleep. When we combine PNS with calorific exercise (cardio) and the lingering endorphins we experienced, it all means that we are in the best position to relax and fall in to a deep and highly repairing sleep.



4. Vitality!

We've covered increased cardio, endorphins and PNS in our nervous system, but when we combine all 3 of these fascinating processes, we can then begin to think about our endocrine system.

This clever system is responsible for producing hormones that regulate metabolism, growth and development, tissue function, sexual function, reproduction, sleep, and mood, among other things. It's the 'grand master' of all the great benefits listed above.

When we regularly submerge ourself in colder water and swim outdoors, this clever system will help you lose and/or maintain your weight, it will strengthen your hair, nails and skin (saving your loads of money on expensive beauty products), it will help your skin to repair itself quicker and glow with health and it can even boost the production of testosterone in men (a handy tool for those looking to start a family).

The more you take a plunge in open water, the more this endocrine system gets to flex its power and get stronger, reducing the likelihood of getting common coughs and colds, improving heart and organ health and even reducing the risk of dementia and some cancers!

So, what are you waiting for? Come and join us!

