

What is Open Water Swimming?

Very simply, open water swimming is swimming that takes place anywhere that isn't a swimming pool. This can include lakes, rivers, lochs, reservoirs and seas. It is very different to swimming in a pool. There are no man-made sides and bottom to push off from, no lane ropes or black lines to follow and no chemicals. The water is usually colder too, even in the middle of summer, and can be flat or choppy depending on the weather and where you are swimming. Often you are surrounded by beautiful views and there are other living things in the water – plants, fish, ducks which add to the fun and sense of freedom! You might also see it referred to as outdoor swimming or wild swimming. Wild swimming also means swimming in groups or individually where there is no supervision (NB it is recommended that you always swim with someone even if you are a very experienced swimmer)

Open water swimming is for everyone of all abilities and age groups as long as you have the ability and confidence to swim without being able to put your feet down. There is a great camaraderie and community between open water swimmers and the sport continues to grow in popularity.

Benefits of open water swimming:

- Water supports your body weight so there is the opportunity to move in ways that you may not be able to on land. The reduced stress on your joints helps reduce the risk of injury.
- Swimming is a full body workout with the resistance of the water providing strength and co-ordination benefits as well as the benefits to your heart and lungs.
- Research has shown that exercise in blue and/or green spaces increases the positive psychological results of exercise.
- During exercise the body releases endorphins and dopamine which are hormones that promote feelings of happiness and pleasure.

- Immersion in cold water creates a stress reaction in your body, the so-called "fight or flight" mode. However, this reaction reduces after only a few times as the body adapts to the stress. Even better, this reduced reaction will also now apply to other forms of stress, both physical and psychological.
- The outdoor swimming community is incredibly friendly and attracts people of all ages, sexes, shapes, sizes, backgrounds and abilities. By joining a local group or beginning to swim with people you already know, you can build on new and existing friendships.

What equipment do I need?

- A swimming costume and goggles are essential. It can be useful to have an extra pair of goggles with tinted lenses for sunny days to help visibility.
- A swimming hat will keep your head warm on colder days and most venues require you to wear a brightly coloured hat so that you are clearly visible.
- Wetsuits are not essential but remember, even on sunny days open water is a lot colder than a heated pool and a wetsuit will keep you warm. They also provide a lot of buoyancy. There are lots of places you can hire a suit from to see if you like it before committing to buying.
- If you are not wearing a wetsuit most venues require that you have a tow float instead. This is a small inflatable float that you attach around your waist that bobs along behind you whilst you are swimming. They help with visibility and if you are not wearing a wetsuit give you something to hold onto if you want to stop for a rest. You can often hire or buy these from venues or, if you want to buy your own, they cost around £15-£30.
- It can take a while to warm up after open water swimming especially if the weather is chilly or windy. It's a good idea to take warm clothes to wear afterwards. A warm drink also helps!