

Open Water Competitions

FAQs for Masters swimmers about
competing in open water events





As a Masters swimmer, you may be interested in taking part in open water swimming events or competitions. This document should help answer any questions you may have about open water swimming.

The popularity of open water swimming has increased in recent years, partly due to the introduction of the sport to the Olympics, and also to high-profile celebrity events such as David Walliams' solo swim of the River Thames in 2011.

The open water swimming community is very welcoming and supportive, not to mention full of camaraderie. There are plenty of opportunities to meet your fellow competitors, both before and after the events.

It is important to note that open water swimming can be quite different to swimming in a pool. It may involve swimming in water with less-than-friendly sea life, in less-than-perfect conditions. But with the correct preparation by both organisers and participants, open water swimming can be a highly rewarding experience.

Is open water swimming safe?

Safety is of paramount importance to Swim England in the conduct of any open water swimming event or competition.

The first step in planning an open water event is for the organisation to consider any health and safety implications. At all times, the organiser's priority must be to safeguard each athlete or participant, and so Swim England has produced a document called The Management of Open Water Events. Although it is not a legal requirement to do so, all Swim England events are organised in accordance with this guide.

How do I find out about Masters open water events?

The calendar on the Swim England website shows all Swim England open water events. Simply filter the events by discipline and select 'open water'. The majority of these events are open to Masters swimmers. You can also look out for event information on regional and county websites.

Other open water events are publicised on the internet, in swimming and triathlon publications, e.g. Swimming Times, H2open and overtaQuatix.

Do I have to swim in a Swim England open water event?

You can swim in any open water event, regardless of who organises it. However, all Swim England events will follow the Management of Open Water Events guide and will minimise the risks to participants wherever possible. If you are taking part in an event being run by another organisation, you can make sure you are happy with the company's organisational abilities before entering by looking at the safety precautions taken, costs, and the previous year's reviews.

Do I have to be a Swim England member to swim in open water events?

No, you do not have to be a Swim England member to swim in open water events unless it is specifically a Swim England event. If you do wish to take part in a Swim England event but you are not a Swim England member, you are able to purchase a one-off 'day-membership' which will allow you to compete.

How do I enter an open water event?

Most open water events now have online entry. All the entry details will be available and you can sign up to an event quite easily.

Be aware that some events may require a statement of your swimming ability, which you will 'sign' to say you are able to complete the course.

Try to sign up early, too. The popularity of open water swimming means that events often get booked up quickly.

Can I wear a wetsuit?

This information will be found as part of the event conditions, which you should read before you enter.

The majority of open water races now allow swimmers to choose whether or not to wear wetsuits. However, some events, where national or regional titles are being contested, will not allow wetsuits as they are seen as 'helping' the athlete to swim faster or by increasing buoyancy.

What happens at an open water event?

At a Swim England open water event, each swimmer must register on arrival at the venue. During registration:

1. Swimmers will receive a numbered hat and have numbers written on their arms, shoulders and hands.
2. Swimmers' fingernails will be checked to ensure they are not too long (FINA rules).
3. A timing band will be given to the swimmer along with instructions on how it is to be worn.
4. Swimming attire will be checked to make sure it is in line with the event conditions/rules.

Each swimmer must attend the swim briefing where the organiser will detail the swim course, the start procedure and start times, race rules, finish and exit details, the water temperature, first aid and emergency procedures and what to do if the event needs to be cancelled part way through.

Other open water events follow a similar format to Swim England events. There may be slight variations in the rules, but the safety information and swimmer briefing usually remains compulsory. If the swimmer does not attend the briefing they will be prevented from entering the water.

For any event, it is important to know where your belongings are being stored or moved to so that you aren't delayed in getting dry and warm afterwards.

What happens in an open water race?

The swimmers will congregate in and around the start area. They will then be directed to the start area by using the number allocated to them upon registration. There are a few different starts: dive start, deep water start, beach start, gradual walk-in start, etc.

Once the race starts, the swimmers take their own route but use the buoys as markers. Buoys may be placed at any point from every 200m to every 500m depending on the course and the distance.

The finish will be clearly marked and could require the swimmer to touch an overhead touch pad, cross an invisible line, touch a finish boat or buoy, or run up the beach to cross a finish line. Once the race has finished, the swimmers will be checked to make sure they are ok, and if required, warm space blankets will be wrapped around them. First aiders are always on duty at the finish line but will be available throughout the race if needed.

Are there any open water rules?

Each event will have specific rules which are clearly stated on the initial entry form and will also be reinforced during the race briefing.

Swim England open water events are under FINA rules.

British Long Distance Swimming Association (BLDSA) events have their own rules.

Other open water events state the rules in the event information.

How do I know when to go for my race?

This will be explained during the swimmers briefing. Please read the answer to 'What happens at an open water event?' on page 6.

Will there be changing facilities at open water events?

Usually there will be changing facilities but this depends on the venue. It will be clearly stated in the event information, which you should read when you sign up to the event.

What do I need to bring with me?

You will need your swim suit, and if required, your wetsuit. You may also need some comfortable goggles that do not leak.

A lot of people bring flip flops or old trainers to put on whilst they wait for the race to start, and warm clothes that are easy to pull on are essential for after you get out of the water. Remember, cold fingers may make buttons harder to fasten! Layers of clothes are most effective, with warm socks and a hat to ensure you limit any heat loss from your extremities.

Warm drinks are usually available after the swim, but you may wish to bring a flask of your favourite drink. Also, don't forget to bring some food for after the race. Snack bars, nuts, fruit, etc. are all good sources of easily digestible nutrients to replace those you have lost throughout the race.



What sort of training should I do before a competition?

A lot of open water swimmers train in indoor pools, often with a masters club. Specific open water training can begin once the weather gets warmer and when open water training facilities have reopened, usually around April or May depending on the water temperature.

Preparation training for an open water swim depends on the length of the swim. You should try and include some interval training and gradually increase the amount you swim so that you become confident in your ability to complete the distance without becoming distressed.

It is important to do some training in water temperatures similar to those you will experience in the race (even if you are wearing a wetsuit). The difference between pool and open water temperatures takes some getting used to.

In addition to water temperature, there will be other differences to take into account when you begin training for open water swimming. Salt water, for example, provides greater buoyancy than normal water. Swimming without pool lines to guide you and the presence of strong currents may also prove to be a challenge. The more experience you can gain of swimming in these types of conditions, the more it will help you improve your technique.

What sort of venues are there for open water events?

There are various types of open water venues including lakes, rivers, reservoirs and the sea.

Who will I be competing against?

Open water events are open to all ages and abilities as long as you are over 18, so you will be competing against a wide range of abilities.

Often there are single sex waves (heats of swimmers starting at the same time). Sometimes, for larger participation events, waves are organised by start times throughout the day so when you enter you also enter a wave start time. Single sex and age group waves are used for Swim England events where there are large numbers of competitors.

I've seen some open water competitions and they look a bit rough – am I likely to get hurt?

Most contact in open water swimming is accidental rather than deliberate. The best policy is to relax and never retaliate as that just wastes valuable energy.

Normally, contact with others will only occur when there are problems with congestion and this happens mainly during starts and turns. With a bit of planning, and knowledge of your own speed and pacing abilities, it's usually possible to avoid physical contact.

However, if you are competitive and want to race in the pack, you have to expect the occasional knock, the experience of someone swimming closely behind you and possibly having your toes touched on a regular basis.

If you want to win, you're going to have to deal with the bumps, but many swimmers just wait a few seconds after the start, take their place behind the pack and swim their own race.

Can I bring my family to open water meets?

Open water events are very social and spectators are usually encouraged, with many events having refreshments, trade shows and music entertainment. Often, the course is a circuit which allows for good spectator viewing.





How much do competitions cost?

Entry fees vary and can range from £10 up to and even over £100.

It all depends on the length of the race and the amount of swimmer support that is required. For example, is the course around a lake in circuits or is the swim from A to B? Usually, the longer the swim, the more expensive the entry fee is. Some events include commemorative t-shirts, hot drinks and sometimes even food after the race has finished which can make the entry fee very good value for money.

What would be a good first meet to try?

Swim England organises open water competitions for masters in each region of the country. These are good first competitions to try for swimmers registered with a club.

The Great Swim series provides fun events for all levels and is a very popular first swim event. However, because so many people take part, this means busy starts, so you may need to come prepared with a starting strategy.

Many training venues host informal small-scale training races. These are usually cheap to enter, involve minimal hassle and have low entry numbers so are ideal for your first racing experience. You can usually practice on the course in advance of race day too.

Whichever event you choose, be realistic. Consider factors such as the distance, temperature or location when deciding.

What should I wear?

If you are worried about the cold and are not used to swimming outdoors, then a wetsuit would be good for the first time. If you aren't concerned about the water temperature, a comfortable swim suit is perfectly acceptable.

You can get lots of advice and guidance about buying a wetsuit from manufacturers, e.g. the Speedo triathlon department has a range of equipment and prices. It's important to make sure that whatever you choose is suitable for swimming rather than other water-based activities.

Do I need to grease up?

Contrary to some beliefs, the only grease you should consider using is one to stop rubbing from your costume or wetsuit. The friction of your skin on the wetsuit or costume around the neck can be painful, and skin-on-skin chafing can be very painful too. Use of an anti-chafe stick if you are wearing a wetsuit is recommended, or petroleum jelly (e.g. Vaseline) if you are wearing a swim suit. Lanolin is not recommended for this purpose.

If you do decide to grease up, make sure you wipe your hands carefully to ensure you don't get any of it on your goggles.

How do I acclimatise to natural water temperatures?

Most open water swimming events are held in water with a temperature of at least 11°C (this is the minimum for triathlon events). Swim England and FINA regulated non-wetsuit events have a minimum temperature requirement of 16°C. BLDSA events do not have this minimum temperature requirement and there is no lower limit, but temperatures will usually be in the teens. Outside water temperatures are significantly colder than most indoor pools and the difference will cause problems for the unwary and inexperienced.

The two principle hazards you could encounter are cold water shock and hypothermia. Cold water shock is an involuntary response to immersion in water colder than what you are used to. It can cause you to gasp suddenly (even if your mouth is underwater) and can trigger a sense of panic. Cold water shock decreases with frequent exposure to open water (about six visits or so is usually enough) and can also be managed to an extent through being mentally prepared for it. The effects usually last around one to two minutes and are the cause of a number of open water deaths when it results in inhalation of water. Keep your face above water until your breathing is under control. A wetsuit does not offer protection against cold water shock.

Hypothermia occurs when your core body temperature drops below 35°C. When you swim in cold water, the body reduces circulation to the limbs to protect the core. This reduces the effectiveness of the muscles in your arms and legs and can make swimming more difficult as you get colder. It can eventually lead to 'swim failure' which may result in drowning. The effects of cold water decrease as a swimmer gains experience and becomes acclimatised. The process of acclimatisation is a little mysterious and seems to have both a physical and mental component. The trick is to swim frequently in open water and gradually increase the time you spend swimming while monitoring how you feel. Always get out and warm up if you start to shiver.

A big danger with hypothermia is that it affects your cognitive powers and ability to reason so it's better to stop too soon than to try and tough it out. A wetsuit will reduce the risk of hypothermia but it won't prevent it.

I've heard about cold water swimming. What is it and is it different to open water swimming?

Cold water events take place in unheated lidos and lakes in the winter. In the UK, water temperatures are typically between 2°C and 7°C. In other places such as Russia or Finland, the conditions are much harsher and sometimes 'pools' are cut out of the ice in lakes and rivers, and air temperatures can drop to below -10°C.

Races are typically short (30m, 60m, 120m) and stroke choices are usually freestyle or head-up breaststroke. Competitions often feature an 'endurance' event in addition to races, which is typically a distance of 450m. The latter is reserved for experienced cold water swimmers only and usually has a cut-off time.

Wetsuits are not allowed, and unlike regular pool races, there is no need to wait in the water for your fellow competitors to finish. There are usually age-group medals and prizes, just like at regular masters competitions, but the emphasis is mainly on having fun and doing something a little eccentric. Participants often report that they get a buzz from overcoming their natural distaste of near freezing water.

There is also a trend towards longer distances (1km and 1 mile) in cold water. These events should really be left to experienced cold water swimmers as there is a high risk of hypothermia.



We hope this document has helped to answer any questions you may have about open water swimming. If you have any further questions, you can contact us using the details below:

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If you are an event organiser and would like to obtain a copy of The Management of Open Water Events, please email facilities@swimming.org.





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