

Open Water FAQ's

Q. Where can I swim?

Open water swimming takes place in all types of bodies of water that are not classed as a swimming pool. You can search for any of these terms to find some where to swim near you:

- Open water swimming is any supervised swimming activity which takes place outside of a swimming pool environment.
- Wild swimming is an informal activity taking place in natural waters; such as lakes, rivers and waterfalls. This is not necessarily swimming long distances but people enjoying their surroundings.
- Outdoor swimming is where individuals or groups of people come together to swim 'outdoors' and enjoy swimming under an open sky.
- Marathon swimming is any organised open water swimming event which is 10k or over.
- Winter swimming is outdoor swimming in cold water (often below 5 degrees Celsius) which could have either a competitive or informal element.

Q. Is it safe to swim in open water?

Open Water swimming can never be completely safe but there are ways of reducing the risks:

- Swim in an organised open water venue/session where additional safety measure should be in place
- Never swim alone
- Acclimatise to the water temperature.
- Make sure you are a confident swimmer over distances before swimming out of your depth – remember there are no walls to hold on to for a rest!
- If you are not confident a tow float may be of help and will allow others to see you clearly.
- Practice your open water swimming skills in the pool before you get into open water; e.g. looking to the front to see where you are going (sighting), breathing both sides in case it's choppy and water is getting blown around, try swimming distances without touching the wall/putting your feet down. Make sure you can tread water in case you need to adjust goggles etc. Practice floating on your back in case you need a rest.
<http://www.swimming.org/masters/preparing-for-open-water-swimming/>
- Ask your local venue for a beginner or introductory coaching session.

Q. When can I start open water swimming?

Most venues open from Easter time to the end of September. Although some will open from limited periods all year round. This is for those swimmers who have taken the time over months to acclimatise their bodies to cold water.

If it's your first time and cold water is a worry then you may like to wait until the end of May/ beginning of June when most inland British waters have warmed up.

Q. It's my first time what can I expect?

- All organised venues will need you to register with them and pay the appropriate fee. This will include some basic details and emergency contacts. You should also let the organiser know if you have a medical condition which may affect your swimming.
- Always follow the organiser's instructions and let them know this is your first time.
- You will then be able to change. This may be in a changing room or even a gazebo arrangement. Your pride may go out of the window occasionally when you may have to change in the odd carpark. Get everything ready and a changing robe may help. If you haven't got a wetsuit you may be able to hire one.
- Before entering the water you should be given a number, band, or an electronic tag system. You should make sure you log in and out of the water.
- You can then enter the water and acclimatise to the temperature slowly. Let a little bit of water into your wetsuit and let it warm up before starting to swim. Swim according to the set course.
- If you are wearing a wetsuit you may need to get used to the way you are more buoyant .i.e. you may find your bum and legs are higher.

Q. Should I buy a wetsuit?

- If you think you are going to take up open water swimming then yes. It will allow you to stay longer in the water and help you enjoy a longer season.
- If you aren't sure you are going to take up open water swimming then try to hire or borrow one from a friend. You can do this online or at some venues.

Q. What sort of wetsuit should I buy?

It's always a good idea to 'try before you buy' which some venues allow. If this isn't possible ask around, get information from others, and talk to your local dealer/shop.

- Wetsuits come in different thicknesses. The thicker they are the warmer they keep you but the more they restrict your movements. The trick is to find the right thickness for you and how you are going to use it. Some swimmers have 2 wetsuits. A thicker, more durable one for everyday training and then a thinner one for their races which should not be thicker than 5mm.
- Top tip – look out for Yamamoto rubber- this is the best quality rubber.
- Whatever you choose it should be 'snug' with no wrinkles and creases when you are standing upright. It may feel a little tight around the neck and chest but shouldn't restrict your breathing. You should be able to comfortably be able to take a full depth breath.
- Majority should be rubber as opposed to a fabric suit i.e. specific to swimming not surfing. Manufacturers may call them triathlon wetsuits
- Raise both arms straight above your head and feel no pull under your arm
- It is not essential to test a wetsuit in the water. If it feels ok on land then it will be even more comfortable in the water. Remember they are made to get to wet.

- The best way to find a wetsuit that's right for you is to check manufacturers size guides. If you don't fit the size guide exactly always go up to the next size. If you are female try looking at the male suits to get a better fit.

Q. What other equipment do I need?

- A swimming costume underneath your wetsuit (this doesn't have to be expensive as it's just for comfort).
- When it's cold some people also wear a rash vest under their suit, a neoprene swim hat, booties and gloves. Two swimming hats may help prevent loss of heat through your head. If you aren't going to swim right at the start of the season and you're finishing at the end of summer then you may find you don't need these.
- 2 pairs of goggles are helpful. One clear or very light lenses for cloudy and dull days. One mirrored, darker for sunny days. They should be comfortable as you may be wearing them for some time. Some people find the larger goggles are better for open water.
- Anti-friction cream not water based – these are applied to any areas of skin to stop your wetsuit rubbing. Mainly your neck where your zip ends. Any wetsuit supplier can recommend a brand.
- Towel which you don't mind getting dirty – water in lakes etc may not be crystal clear and lovely fluffy white towels might not stay that lovely for long.
- Always take a set of warm clothes with you. No matter how warm it is you may feel cold when you get out. A woolly hat will help you retain heat when you are particularly cold.
- Top tip - put a pair of small rubber tipped gardening gloves into your kit back. Wear these when you are putting your wetsuit on. This will help you grip your wetsuit and stop your nails piercing the material.

<http://www.swimming.org/masters/open-water-swimming-kit/>

Q. Will the water be cold?

The simple answer is yes! Nowhere else will you purposely get into water as cold as the sea or some lakes, so unless you are used to it you will feel the cold. However your wetsuit will keep you quite comfortable down to temperatures around 16° and swimming hard in water temperatures over 20° is likely to cause you to overheat.

Temperature	How does this feel?
29° - 30°+	Happy to float about in the sunshine
27° - 28°	Floating's fine but you might have to move around a bit
23° - 26°	Swim and you'll be warm
18° - 22°	Perfect for continuous swimming and hard training.
15° - 17°	A bit nippy. You'll have to swim hard to keep warm.
Below 14°	Cold! You should allow your body to build up resistance to these temperatures over time

Q. Will I be able to see in the water?

This depends on where you are swimming. Some seas and lakes are beautifully clear and clean, whereas others get a lot of 'churn' from boats which will muddy the water or bring weeds up from the bottom. However open water swimming is not the same as the pool. You will always have some reduced visibility so it's good to expect this when you first get in.

Q. How do I know if the water is safe to swim in?

All water that is open for swimming should be tested for harmful pathogens. If the test shows these are above a safe level then you should not swim. If you are concerned ask the organiser who should easily be able to give you this information. However please be aware this can change on a day to day basis and no one can test their water every day.

You may have heard of swimmers itch. This appears as a red rash, particularly on areas of exposed skin. This is not due to any pathogens in the water and whilst it may cause a little discomfort, is not harmful to humans. It is also called cercarial dermatitis and is a skin rash caused by an allergic reaction to infection with certain parasites of birds and mammals. These microscopic parasites are released from infected snails who swim in fresh and salt water, such as lakes, ponds, and oceans.

Q. Where is it safe to swim in the sea?

<https://swimsafe.org.uk/safety-tips>

Q. What do I do if I get in to trouble in the water?

- Always know your organiser's safety system before entering the water but the recognised action is to float onto your back and wave one arm in the air. If you have a whistle keep blowing this vigorously until help arrives.

Q. How do I prepare for my first open water race?

<http://www.swimming.org/masters/prepare-for-your-first-open-water-swim/>

What can I expect to happen in an open water race?

All open water events are organised slightly differently but you will always get some pre swim information either via post or email. On the day the following will normally happen:

- You arrive and register for your event
- Go to the changing area – often a tent or marquee – but if you're lucky will be changing rooms.
- At some point before your race take your bag to the drop off area or give it to your accompanying friend.
- You will be given a time to go to your race briefing (either some time before or at the start of your race) This includes what the course looks like and which side you keep the buoys on, and how to finish/go to feeding platforms if 10k and over.
- Go to the start of your race. Follow the organiser's instructions and enjoy yourself.
- When you've finished you will be given your medal/goodie bag.
- At some events you may be asked to go through showers or baths to rinse your suit (this is to reduce pathogens spreading to other bodies of water).
- Retrieve your bag
- Get changed – making sure you shower if possible and wear lots of warm clothes if it's cold.

- Go home with a big proud smile as you've done it!

Q. How do I get better at open water swimming?

Most open water venues will offer coaching in different forms. It's always worth taking these up. However if you would like long term progress then joining a club will give you a coach who can give you technique tips and session plans specific to your needs.

Try finding a club near you: <http://www.swimming.org/masters/getting-into-masters-swimming/>

You can also read lots of hints and tips on our open water section on the website:

<http://www.swimming.org/masters/masters-training-room/open-water-tips/>