Open Water Swimming

Safety Tips

Swim Ulster

WildSwim.ie
IRISH OPEN WATER SWIMMING

Ards and North Down Borough Council

Open Water includes: the sea, freshwater lakes, rivers, estuaries, ponds, and reservoirs.

There are many Open Water environments to choose from, and each presents its own set of specific risks and hazards which need to be researched before you swim.

The following are some of the considerations you will have to take in account and research, for any given location, venue, or environment:

- **Local weather conditions**
  Wind, rain, fog, hail, lightning, visibility, tides, waves, fast moving rivers, and the quality of water you are planning to swim in. Remember – even when the weather is warm, the water may still be cold.
- **Entry and exit points**
  Conditions under foot (sand, pebbles, shingle), harbour slipways, the shape of the beach, the state of the tide or riverbank. Remember – always identify a single point of entry and exit which is easily accessible.
- **Water visibility**
  Open Water will not be clear as in a purpose-built swimming pool. Visibility can vary especially around coastal waters. It can change within a few metres and can change rapidly, particularly in inland waters such as lakes or rivers.

Essential Skills

With unpredictable depths and changing conditions, swimmers need to be proficient in skills, such as: the ability to float and tread water; sculling and movement through the water

- **Floating**
  Floating on your back allows you to settle your breathing, take a rest, clear your goggles or simply relax and enjoy.
- **Treading Water**
  With no walls to hold onto it is essential to develop the ability to keep your head above water with ease. You may use various leg actions, the key is to remain relaxed and buoyant.
- **Sculling**
  This is a hand movement associated with treading water and helps you develop much more powerful swimming strokes and skills.
- **Movement**
  Rotating from front to back and visa-versa, stopping, turning and changing strokes are all useful in dealing with the constant changes in the Open Water.

Think Safety First

Think where, when, and even *if* you should swim.
Be realistic about your own abilities and assess the conditions – if in doubt, **don't**.

- **Never swim alone**
  Join a group or find someone experienced and willing to go with you.
- **Know your limits**
  Learn to assess whether it is safe for you to swim; conditions, temperature, tides, wind, current fitness level, all play a role in determining if it is safe.
- **Swim parallel and close to shore**
  Keeping close to shore means you can exit more easily, remember the cold saps strength extremely quickly.
- **Make sure you can easily get out again**
  Know your entry and exit points, are there currents? Steep banks? Rocks? Do you need to consider different entry and exit points?
- **Be visible**
  Wear a bright coloured cap, swim in pairs or groups and use a tow-float anywhere outside of designated swimming areas and where there is any possibility of other craft on the water.
- **Don't rush in**
  Avoid cold water shock – walk in gradually. Splash your arms, face and neck. Control your breathing. Float, gently tread water or swim with your head up and focus on relaxed breathing before you swim face down.

Equipment

What do I need?

- **Swim cap**
  Brightly coloured, silicone or neoprene are best.
- **Tow-float**
  Vital for swimming outside designated swim areas, making you visible to other users
- **Wet suit** (optional)
  Neoprene wetsuit, booties or beach shoes.
- **Towel**
  After swimming get dried and dressed quickly.
- **Warm clothes**
  Dress in easy to pull-on layers. Your temperature will continue to drop post-swim. Have your clothes left out in the order you will be putting them on. Lots of layers and a coat.
- **Warm hat**
  We lose a lot of heat through our heads.
- **Flask**
  A warm cuppa and a chat afterwards are all part of the fun!
- **Protect your ears**
  A cap and ear plugs will help protect you from 'swimmers' ear,' a condition which can be painful and result in hearing impairment. Keep ears covered in cold water and protected from the wind.

How long should I stay in the water?

Get out while you still want more – your body temperature will continue to drop for around 20 minutes after your swim. When you leave the water get dried and dressed quickly.

Take a brisk walk or enjoy a post-swim cuppa with friends.

Not every day is a swimming day, look at the conditions and then decide if it's suitable to get in. Check wind strength and weather forecasts before you swim and then check the tides. There are plenty of Apps which help you view tides, wind weather forecasts. e.g. windy.com

Benefits to Open Water Swimming

In seeking the Open Water, to swim on a regular basis for recreation and personal fitness, or just choosing to dip or dunk occasionally, you will find a whole new world of experiences awaiting you. There are some tremendous health and social benefits to Open Water swimming which include the following:

- **Better sleep**
  When you swim outdoors, the cold water stimulates your Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS), which is responsible for repairing the body. Stimulating the PNS promotes a feeling of relaxation, often with a sense of contentment, which should deliver a better night's sleep.
- **Better circulation**
  When we become cold, blood rushes to our organs, making our hearts work a little bit harder. Every time you swim outdoors, the cold water helps to boost your circulation by pumping blood through your capillaries, arteries and veins.
- **Increased happiness**
  You will know that immersing yourself in cold water, whether in the sea, a lake or simply in the shower, it can make your skin sting and take your breath away. To reduce the stinging sensation, your brain releases endorphins (painkillers produced by your body), which results in a feeling of wellbeing once you are back on dry land. Combine this with a workout in the great outdoors (proven to reduce stress and promote mental wellbeing) and you have a powerful way to inject some happiness into your day!
- **Increased metabolism**
  Swimming in cold water makes your body work harder to keep warm, which increases the number of calories you burn. The colder the water, the more energy your body will convert from fat to fire up your metabolism and keep your core temperature stable.
- **Boosted immune system**
  Immersing your body in cold water for an hour can shock the immune system and help produce more white blood cells and more antioxidants. This can help to boost your immune system and reduce your risk of heart disease and cancer.

- **Better skin**
  Cold water exfoliates the skin, flushing out impurities and making it smoother. This all adds up to you feeling better inside and out every time you swim outdoors.
- **Expanding your social circle**
  The social benefits are great! There are lots of groups of Open Water swimmers who get together on a regular basis to enjoy a nice, and often cold, dip. There is a camaraderie in this activity like no other. You do not have to participate in the sport to race or even be competitive; you can do it for the sheer enjoyment of being out there.
- **Personal achievement**
  Whether you complete your first Open Water swim or your first competition, simply adapting to the temperature of the water compared to the pool and not being able to see what's below you is an achievement. The sense of personal accomplishment is amazing, and its lots of fun. It is a great way to push your fitness and improve your wellbeing, meet new people, laugh a lot and it won't break the bank. However, beware – it is addictive and once you try it you might get hooked!

Advice before swimming

As you plan and prepare for your Open Water swim session consider the following guidelines:

- Do not eat a heavy meal prior to Open Water swimming
- Cover cuts and abrasions, however minor with waterproof adhesive plasters
- Do not swim with deep cuts
- Remove any jewellery
- When swimming with others, always lookout for their safety
- Always swim in the designated areas and be constantly aware of your exit location.

Risks associated with Cold Water Shock

When a swimmer enters very cold water, they often intake a large breath, often without exhaling. Therefore, a swimmer needs to exhale and control their breathing. Acclimatisation into cold water is often through controlling your breathing to allow the body and mind to function. Possible signs of cold water shock include, clawing at wetsuit, breath holding and hyperventilation.

NOTE: Anything below 15c is defined as cold water.

Potential Hazards

- **Hypothermia**
  This occurs when the body temperature drops below 35c. In the water the body can lose approximately 20 to 30 times more heat than at the same temperature on land. Tolerance to hypothermia can be influenced by the following factors:
  - Low temperatures, wind and a lack of sunshine can make you more susceptible to heat loss.
  - Dehydration and lack of nutrition reduces your ability to work your muscles and generate heat
  - Fat levels. The lower your subcutaneous fat levels, the more susceptible you are to hypothermia
  - Acclimatisation. The more experienced you become, and the more often you immerse in cold water can reduce the risk of hypothermia.
- **Heat stroke**
  Occurs when the core body temperature reaches high levels of 40c. The possible signs are as follows: dizziness, fainting, confusion, headache, lowered levels of response, nausea and vomiting, flushed, hot and dry skin. Although less likely in the varied climate of Northern Ireland, it is important to be aware of this condition when swimming for prolonged periods in warmer waters and not hydrating on a regular basis.
- **Underwater hazards**
  These will include rocks, silt, mud, weeds, kelp, glass, discarded fishing tackle and should be moved away from your designated swimming area.
- **Blue-green algae**
  This occurs in fresh and sea water when the weather is warm, and the blooms can be in various colours and present very harmful effects when encountering it. Avoid swimming if you see blue-green algae.
- **Other hazards**
  Lakes and rivers are home to fish, waterfowl, small mammals, and lots of insects. Swans and geese are territorial animals and must be always respected as they can display aggressive behaviour. Coastal locations will have potentially dangerous wildlife, including jellyfish, weever fish and crabs.
- **Other water activities**
  Swimmers need to be aware of activity and people hazards when swimming. These include: Kite surfers | Dinghy sailing | Jet skis | Beach fishing | Kayaking and Canoeing | Powerboats | Paddle Boards | Fishing nets and roped marker buoys.

Conclusion

Open Water swimming is challenging, exhilarating and fun but it also carries significant risks that need to be always managed correctly.

Education and Open Water Safety Awareness is the key to your enjoyment and always remember the No 1 Golden Rule: **Never Swim Alone** and always think: **Safety, Safety, Safety**.

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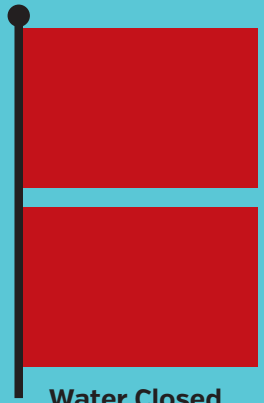
Beach Warning Flags

Know what they mean before
you go into the water



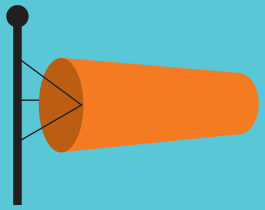
Water Closed To Public Use

No Swimming, High Hazard (high surf and strong current)

Caution, Medium Hazard (moderate surf and current)

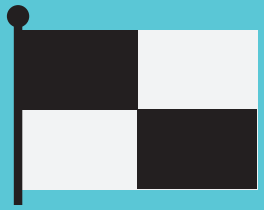
Safe To Swim (calm conditions)

Presence of Dangerous Marine Life

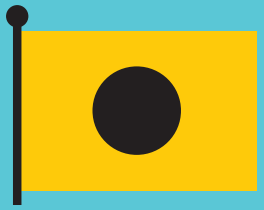


Offshore Winds Present, Inflatables Should Not Be Used

Recommended Swimming Area with Lifeguard On Duty



Surfing Area, No Swimming



No Watercraft and Surfboards

Diving In Progress