



## Introduction

Swimming in open water for a triathlon or swimming event can be really worrying for novices and weaker swimmers. It can also be a concern for the more experienced and stronger swimmers depending on the conditions. This guide attempts to make the experience safer, more enjoyable and help you to avoid making some common mistakes. Once 'mastered' open water swimming can be really enjoyable and rewarding. At this point it is probably worth pointing out that some people find this easy, they can dive into the coldest waters and swim away, making it look easy (if you are one of these lucky people then feel free to ignore most of the points below). For the majority though it is quite daunting and a great many of us find it difficult and could be prone to the odd wee 'panic attack'. The cold is a huge factor in this and open water swimming in the UK means the temperature is arguably the biggest issue. The good news is that proper preparation, a bit of practice and following a few hints make it fairly easy for us all to become confident, safe open water swimmers.

## Safety First

It goes without saying that you need to be safe when open water swimming. In 2014, 36 people drowned while swimming in the sea, river, lochs, lakes etc. We need to remember that probably all of these people thought they were 'safe', they thought they could cope with the conditions.

Here are a few points to consider:

- Only swim in a place where it is safe to swim, many rivers, reservoirs etc. are not safe for swimming. Local triathlon clubs will know the safest locations and probably have organised swim sessions you could join in with.
- Only swim with others and preferably where there is supervision and safety cover, eg a club or organised session.
- If you are a weaker swimmer or novice, you should consider buying one of the 'tow floats' available. These are typically small inflatable floats you tow along behind you, if you have a panic, get cramp or need a wee rest then you can hold on to the float.

- If you are swimming with others, look out for one another, make sure everyone is OK.
- Where practical, always use a proper, swimming/triathlon wetsuit. These protect against the cold and also help you float. If you need a rest or start to feel a wee panic starting then stop and roll onto you back and you will find the wetsuit will pretty much keep you afloat with little or no effort.
- Don't swim alone.
- Remember there is an increased risk when open water swimming in UK compared to pool swimming

## Get the Right Gear

Having the right equipment makes a huge difference to your safety, comfort and speed. A few pointers are mentioned below:

- Get a decent, swimming or triathlon wetsuit (usually shiny, smooth surface). Other wetsuits such for surfing etc. aren't ideal, they restrict your movement, are not usually as buoyant or warm. Cheap suits start about £100 and are ideal for beginners. As suits get more expensive they tend to have more panels and use different thicknesses of material for flexibility and buoyancy. Unless you have plenty of money or are sponsored then there is no need to spend more than £300 or so.
- It goes without saying that you need a wetsuit that fits you! Too tight and it will be hard to get on and off, and will restrict your movement (making you tire quicker and swim slower). If it is too big then water will get in and 'pool' in baggy areas. This again will make you tire quicker and swim slower. It will also make it colder. Ideally you would try several on to get one that fits 'snuggly'. If you order online, make sure you can return it and check the sizing charts carefully (and be honest about your size 😊).
- If you are swimming in cold water, then consider a neoprene swimming cap, these make a big difference to heat loss from your head. If it is a bit warmer then you may get away with a decent silicon cap or double up with silicon caps (one below your goggles and one above).
- If it is really cold then you can also get neoprene gloves and boots.
- You can get dedicated goggles designed for open water and many people prefer these but the key thing is a pair of goggles that are comfortable, fit well and don't leak. In the cold goggles tend to 'fog' up quickly. When new the ant-fog coatings work fairly well but this doesn't last long. If you swim with others get some opinions and try some out for size and fit. If you find a style you like then it might be an idea to buy a spare pair!
- You can get some chaffing and rubbing around the neck and might want to consider products such as Vaseline, Body Glide, baby oil etc. Some people also find the wetsuit can be difficult to get off and again use Body Glide, baby oil etc. There are reports of Vaseline being bad for wetsuits but in my experience I have never seen any damage in 20 years of using Vaseline with my wetsuit and I prefer it for the neck where it says on well and prevents chaffing.

- Remember after a swim, rinse your wetsuit, let it dry and fold carefully.

### How does it differ from Pool Swimming?

Swimming with a wetsuit is quite different from swimming without one in a pool. Many people find it easier and faster, a wetsuit is buoyant and can improve the body position of a weaker swimmer. Some 'good' swimmers notice less of an advantage and can find people they normally beat in a pool can keep up with them! A few key points are listed below:

- Swimming with a wetsuit changes your stroke and swimming. It normally raises your legs and makes you more buoyant. You can normally get away with a reduced leg kick. Many find the restriction of the wetsuit tires the shoulders and arms a bit and takes some practice to get used to this restriction.
- You don't have a nice black line to follow, you need to try to swim in a straight line and every few strokes check you are still heading in the right direction. It is known as sight breathing and many people sight breathe every 3, 5, 7 strokes (depending on conditions and how straight you swim). Sight breathing just means that, as you lift your head to breathe you look forward, have a quick look and then breathe as normal. With practice there is very little disruption to your stroke and it is really easy to do. Swimming in a straight line isn't that easy and takes practice!
- Depending on the swim location you might have to deal with currents and flowing water. You might have to sight more often and aim slightly up into the current to counteract the flow.
- You might also have to deal with waves or choppy conditions. This can be difficult and you need to be very careful. You can lift your head higher than normal when breathing and remember that if the waves are coming from one side then breathing to the opposite side will help. If you think you will have to deal with choppy conditions in a race then get some practice in. Practicing bilateral breathing (breathing to both sides) in the pool will help since this means you can choose the easiest side to breath to. If you can only breath to one side then try to time your breathing and lift your head more to clear the waves.

### Avoiding the 'Panic'

Lots of us have had wee moments of panic when open water swimming. In my first open water race I had a wee panic, had to roll on to my back and ended up completing at least 1300m of a 1500m swim back crawl, I just couldn't put my face in the cold, dark water!! The good news is that this gets better with practice and experience. It also gets easier with a few of the tips below. Some people don't have issues and find this easy but if you aren't one of these lucky people then read on:

- Take your time getting into the water, there is no rush, walk in to waist height and let the water seep into your suit. Keep going till it is up to your neck and seeping in through the zip and neck. Again take your time and just tread water, you will find you start to relax. Splash or quickly dip your face in the water. Swim some breast

stroke or some head up front crawl. When you are ready swim a few strokes with your face in the water then stop, relax and go again. Repeat if required before starting your swim properly.

- In my experience people panic largely because they rush the stages above. You need to give yourself time to acclimatise, for example don't rush in, with 2 minutes to the start of your race! So many people leave it till the last moment before a race to get into the water, not a good idea.
- Another problem many people have is starting too fast, take it easy for the first few minutes, almost all 'panics' happen shortly after the start. Take the first few minutes really easy and gradually increase your speed as you feel comfortable.
- If you start to feel a 'panic' coming on, slow down and try to relax. If it continues then stop and roll onto your back, the wetsuit will keep you afloat as you start to relax, take your time before starting to swim again.

### Life Saving!

I was a lifeguard for many years and we were always taught that at all costs to avoid contact with someone in trouble. If someone is in serious difficulty and you approach them they are very likely to drag you under. You could pass them a tow float, shout at them to roll onto their back, use a rope/pole etc. but I would be very, very careful in approaching them.

### About the Author

As with any topic there are different opinions, and this is no different. I make no bold claims but in 25 years of training and racing you pick up a few 'secrets' and find out what works and what doesn't. In a previous career I was a lifesaving coach, swimming teacher and club swimming coach. I've also raced for GB as an age grouper, completed 5 Ironman events and so on but my best qualification for writing this is ..... I have never found open water swimming easy. In the early days I have had a few wee 'panics' and found it difficult. I was the person that didn't go in early enough before a race and so on. I have to say, I now love it but still make sure I give myself plenty of time to get used to the cold and don't hammer it at the start!!

Cheers,

Kenny G

