



GUIDANCE FOR OPEN WATER SWIMMERS

(Version 1: 27 November 2020)

IN ASSOCIATION WITH



SH₂OUT INTRODUCTION

SH₂OUT is a partnership between British Triathlon, Swim England and RLSS UK which has been developed to promote and progress open water swimming and safety within the sport.

The partnership aims to provide appropriate resources and to support the development of standards that ensure safe and compelling experiences for open water swimming participants.

This guidance has been developed through the collaboration and input of all three organisations and in association with Triathlon Scotland, Scottish Swimming, Swim Wales, and Welsh Triathlon. The aim is to provide guidance to swimmers on how to approach open water swimming.

COVID-19 OPENING STATEMENT

This document is based on the latest government instruction across England, Scotland, and Wales regarding Coronavirus/Covid-19 and is designed to offer guidance to open water swimmers in all British territories. It is updated regularly to respond to the changing instructions.

ENGLAND

This document is based on the government's document; Our Plan to Rebuild: The UK Government's Covid-19 Recovery Strategy. This version, specifically, responds to the announcement that organised sport can resume following the national lockdown on 2 December 2020 and remains exempt from mainstream restrictions on indoor and outdoor exercise activity. We return to the three tiered structure across England (MEDIUM, HIGH, VERY HIGH) and updated government guidance can be found [here](#).

SCOTLAND

These guidelines should be read in conjunction with any updated Scottish Government guidance on health, physical distancing, and hygiene. Clubs, coaches, and participants should be aware of and can adapt to changes in guidance at short notice. Information on the Scottish Government's approach to managing Covid-19 is available at [Scottish Government: Coronavirus in Scotland Guidance](#).

WALES

These guidelines should be read in conjunction with any updated Welsh Government guidance on health, physical distancing, and hygiene. Information on the Welsh Government's approach to managing Covid-19 is available [here](#).

COLD WATER SWIMMING OPENING STATEMENT

SH₂OUT acknowledges that individuals may wish to swim in open water at temperatures below 11°C. The guidance in this document complements the guidance provided to SH₂OUT Accredited Venues looking to facilitate recreational cold water swimming. This guidance does not cover either one-off events such as Festive Dips, or competitive, winter swimming and ice swimming events which are organised under the auspices of either the International Winter Swimming Association (IWSA) or the International Ice Swimming Association (IISA).

SWIMMERS GUIDANCE

Open water can include rivers, reservoirs, lakes, natural pools, lochs, and the sea. There is a big difference between swimming in a pool and swimming outdoors and there is an even higher risk of drowning when swimming in the sea.

If you do decide to go open water swimming, we recommend the following:

- Never swim alone.
- Let someone in your household know where you are, what you are doing and expected time to return.
- It is your responsibility that you are sufficiently fit and healthy to participate in open water swimming. You should think about any pre-existing medical conditions that you may have and if you are in any doubt, we recommend that you do not swim.
- In terms of sea swimming, RNLI lifeguards may not be in operation on all beaches. Those partaking in sea swimming must understand the risks and take the necessary steps to keep themselves safe. This will help reduce the demand on lifeboat crews and other emergency services. You can find RNLI advice for sea swimming [here](#).
- Follow all the guidance outlined below.

COVID-19

When open water swimming is permitted by your government, you should ask yourself whether you think it is a socially responsible thing for you to do; due to the inherent dangers, increased risk and pressure that this may cause the NHS and emergency services. Certainly, if you are new to open water swimming, we do not advise that you go open water swimming outside of an operated and supervised venue which has a safety crew. You should adhere to social distancing requirements throughout your swim including arrival, changing and post swim.

COLD WATER SWIMMING

If you choose to swim in water temperatures below 11°C, it is important that you understand how the body responds to immersion in cold water. Additionally, you should be aware of the problems associated with cold water once you have exited the water, specifically cold shock, peripheral cooling and hypothermia. Information on these are found further on in this guidance.

Pre-Swimming

Should you swim?

As mentioned above, it is your responsibility that you are sufficiently fit and healthy to participate in open water swimming. You should think about any pre-existing medical conditions that you may have and if you are in any doubt, we recommend that you do not swim.

COVID-19

It is yet unclear what impact Covid-19 will have on the long-term health of those who contracted the virus. As a precaution, you should consider the following:

- If you were hospitalised due to Covid-19, you should undergo a form of health screening prior to taking part in open water swimming. This screening is best led by a doctor with specialist training in sports medicine. However other doctors may feel competent to make decisions on your fitness to compete and to decide any appropriate investigations that might be required.
- If you were not hospitalised due to Covid-19, but self-isolated having shown symptoms at any time, you are also recommended to undergo a form of screening.
- If you have felt entirely well during the pandemic, you are not routinely recommended to undergo health screening, but it is something to be considered as part of your normal health monitoring for the health-conscious competitor.
- People who are shielding should not visit venues or undertake activities.
- People who are symptomatic should self-isolate for ten days. Household members living with someone who has tested positive should isolate for 14 days as per info on NHS guidance. No one who is self-isolating should attend an outdoor sports facility/activity.

Your GP should be able to guide you on what level of screening you may require, and who is the best person to assist you in the process. Again, if you are in any doubt about your health, you should not swim.

COLD WATER SWIMMING

Swimming in cold water should always be approached with care, as it puts additional pressure on the cardio-vascular system. If you have any known medical conditions or a family history of cardio-vascular conditions OR if you have previously experienced difficulties after swimming in cold water refer to your GP before participating.

Where to swim?

We recommend that you swim in an operated and supervised open water venue.

You can find a list of accredited SH₂OUT venues [here](#). A SH₂OUT accredited venue is one that has had its documentation, procedures, water safety provision and operations approved by SH₂OUT in 2020.

You can find some other open water venues [here](#). Please note that SH₂OUT don't endorse or promote swimming at these venues, and the level of safety at these venues may not be known.

We recognise that Scotland does not have any SH₂OUT accredited venues. As a result, we understand that swimmers may access the sea, lochs, or reservoirs.

If you decide to swim in open water that is not operated or supervised, then you should carefully plan the location based on the following:

- Check out local knowledge and advice (speak to clubs or other swimmers).
- Make sure you have permission to swim at your chosen spot if required.
- Look out for safety signs and online information/feedback.
- Avoid weirs, locks, and other structures.
- If a sign says, “no swimming” and/or “danger” do not swim there.
- Think about the water quality - is the water potentially polluted (e.g. looks dirty, is a strange colour or smells) or does it have any pipes running into it. Do not swim in stagnant water.
- Think about water temperature and the weather, as outlined below.
- Be aware of tides and currents. A strong current can easily prevent you reaching where you want to swim, or it could pull you away from your planned exit point.

COVID-19

ENGLAND  WALES 

It is advised to contact the venue that you plan to swim at prior to arrival to ensure that the venue is open and operating swimming. Some venues will require a pre-booking prior to swimming to enable them to maintain social distancing at their venue and whilst swimming. We are providing guidance and support to venues to operate whilst implementing Covid-19 advice. Avoid touching gates, fences, benches, etc. where possible.

Arrive as close as possible to when you need to be at the venue and allow others to leave before you enter. Once, finished, ensure you leave the venue before the end of your allotted time so that it is empty for the next participant.

Venues should also request your contact details in order to ensure they are able to support if requested to be part of the NHS Test and Trace service.

SCOTLAND 

If you choose to swim in open water in Scotland, you should stay local (broadly within 5 miles of your home), stay away from outdoor “honey pots” and follow above guidance. Avoid touching gates, fences, benches, etc. where possible.

COLD WATER SWIMMING

SH₂OUT are working with a small number of venues to pilot recreational cold water swimming. If you would like to identify if your local open water swimming venue is part of the cold water swimming pilot please email [SH₂OUT](mailto:SH2OUT@sh2out.co.uk).

Equipment

In England and Wales, for all open water swimming below 20°C, the wearing of a full body wetsuit is recommended.

In Scotland, Scottish Swimming recommend that wetsuits are worn for all open water swimming below 18°C and depending on air temperature and swimmer experience when the water temperature is between 18-20°C wetsuit use needs to be assessed.

Use your own clearly marked equipment and only take the equipment that you need to participate safely.

Wetsuits provide insulation against the cold, extending the time a swimmer can remain (comfortably) in the water. They also increase buoyancy so that, even when static, swimmers float. These two qualities can help build confidence in swimmers but only if the wetsuit fits well.

Poorly fitting wetsuits are a common source of stress and anxiety, particularly for swimmers who are new to open water swimming. If wetsuits are too tight, they can restrict movement and breathing to a point where the swimmer may unzip the suit for relief, causing it to flood with water. If they are not tight enough, they will also flood with water. In both these cases drag is increased making swimming far more difficult as well as compromising the insulating properties of the wetsuit.

The main things to check when you put on your wetsuit are:

- That the wetsuit fits snugly - particularly around the neck where a good seal helps prevent excess water entering the suit.
- There is a comfortable fit from crotch to shoulder so that arm reach and flexibility are not restricted.
- There is correct length in the arms and legs without excess material being gathered up that will increase drag.
- The wetsuit is not being worn back to front.

We also recommend the use of a tow float. A tow float is a brightly coloured, inflatable bag that is attached to the swimmer via a line/waistband. The benefits of a tow float include:

- Increased visibility of the swimmer
- It can make it easier to identify you - making recovery easier.

Goggles are recommended as they allow you to see underwater obstructions.

A brightly coloured swim cap again can help with being seen, which can be important if there are boats passing by.

When open water swimming, cover cuts and abrasions, however minor, with sticking plasters. Don't swim if you have deep cuts or open wounds as the infection risk is higher, including the risk of contracting Weil's disease.

COVID-19

Use toilet facilities at home before you leave. Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before leaving home to go to the venue (or use an alcohol gel if washing hands is not possible). Arrive changed and ready to participate. Shower at home as any changing rooms will be closed.

Ensure you take hand sanitiser, a towel, warm clothes (including hat and gloves), a full water bottle and a hot drink for after your swim. See the post-swim section below.

COLD WATER SWIMMING

There is a wide range of wetsuits available, and for cold water swimming the following points should be considered:

- A full body wetsuit offers greater insulation than a shorty or sleeveless suit that increase the amount of exposed skin.
- The thicker the neoprene the greater the level of insulation so it may be worth considering a thicker suit for winter swimming.

In addition to a well-fitting wetsuit, there are other items of kit made from neoprene that cover the extremities, helping to reduce the rate of cooling as well as numbness and pain experienced by some swimmers in cold water. They may also prevent damage to the nerves and blood vessels of the hands and feet that can occur with prolonged exposure to the cold. These are:

- Neoprene hats/balaclavas
- Neoprene gloves and boots

Weather Conditions and Water Temperature

Different types of weather can lead to additional risks that you need to be aware of. In hot weather, there can be a significant difference between the air and water temperature - see Swim Entry guidance on the following page. Strong winds can also make swimming conditions difficult, as water can become unsettled and wavy and add wind chill, so you may get colder than you expect. You should never swim if there is any danger of an electrical storm. We advise only swimming when the weather is suitable and calm.

Both high and low water temperatures can put significant stress on swimmers putting your health at risk. You can mitigate the risks posed by water temperature and weather conditions by acclimatisation - please see Equipment section above and Swim Entry below.

COLD WATER SWIMMING

There are a wide range of factors that impact on an individual's cold water tolerance and therefore it is very difficult to specify a minimum water temperature or maximum swim time or distance. However, it is true to say in all cases that as the water temperature drops the level of risk increases and swimmers must be aware of this.

Whilst swimming

Swim Entry and Exit

Planning your entry to and exit out of the water prior to swimming is vital. You need to be able to enter the water slowly in a safe way that allows you to acclimatise to the water temperature - do not jump in. You need to be able to give yourself the opportunity to get used to the water temperature and regulate your breathing close to your water entry point in case you panic and need to exit.

When open water swimming, the colder the water and air temperature, the quicker you will cool down and the colder it is the less time you should spend in the water.

It is important to consider underfoot conditions leading to your entry point - to avoid risks of cuts and grazes. Try to wear shoes as close as possible to the water's edge and look out for sharp stones or broken glass.

To acclimatise we recommend that you:

- Immerse yourself slowly
- Put your face in the water
- Take some deep breaths
- Gently tread water slowly moving your legs and arms
- If you become nervous or uncomfortable, it is recommended that you roll on to your back and float and breathe deeply until you regain control. Your wetsuit and your tow float will help keep you buoyant.
- Avoid touching your face

Prior to entering the water for the first time you should plan your exit point etc. You should ensure you can easily exit the water prior to entry and make sure you have access to your towel and warm clothing quickly upon exiting the water. Remember to consider currents and tides.

COVID-19

You also need to ensure you can find clear water and where it is possible to keep 2 metres apart you should. Where it is not, you should keep a social distance of '1 metre plus', meaning you should remain 1 metre apart, while taking mitigations to reduce the risk of transmission.

COLD WATER SWIMMING

When you first get into cold water you will experience the cold shock response - initial gasp, rapid breathing, increase heart rate and blood pressure. During this time it is difficult to coordinate swimming and breathing. Always acclimatise to the water temperature before attempting to swim, and keep your head above water as you acclimatise.

Wetsuits do not remove the cold shock response as they fill with water when you get in. The benefit kicks in when the layer of water trapped between the skin and the wetsuit warms up.

Going into very cold water (typically less than 10°C) can cause numbness and pain, particularly in the extremities, such as the hands and feet. Neoprene socks and gloves can help protect your hands and feet.

When you are cold your thinking and mobility are impaired. Always check that you know where and how to exit before entering the water.

Swim Course

When planning your entry and exit point, you also need to plan your swim course/route. Take into consideration:

- How long you plan to swim for (limit your time in the water if the temperature is close to 11°C - stop before you get cold).
- Your experience as an open water swimmer - you will fatigue, and this can affect your ability to hold your swim stroke technique. You may also cramp, if this happens roll onto your back. This will help you float, then relax and wait until you recover.
- Your health and whether you have any pre-existing conditions that may affect your ability to cope with the open water swimming environment.
- Where possible swim along the shoreline and as close to the bank as safe to do so.
- If you get into difficulty in the water, don't panic, stay calm and float on to your back until you can control your breathing and then continue to swim once again.

COVID-19

Where it is possible to keep 2 metres apart you should. Where it is not, you should keep a social distance of '1 metre plus', meaning you should remain 1 metre apart, while taking mitigations to reduce the risk of transmission from the person you are swimming with (unless from your own household).

Think about how this may be affected by other water users - boats and other swimmers. If you have any hesitation about being able to maintain the social distancing rules at any point during your swim, you should not proceed.

COLD WATER SWIMMING

As you get colder you can experience mental confusion, slurred speech and poor movement coordination.

Never set time goals for staying in the water, and get out if you are not comfortable. Always follow the instructions of the safety team and get out if they ask you to - they have your best interests at heart.

Post-Swim

Recovery - re-heat plan and nutrition

Once you have finished swimming and exited the water, and then you need to dry off and dress immediately. It is advisable to put on warm clothes, including a hat and gloves. This is to reduce the risk of you suffering from the "after drop", which is the lowering of your core temperature.

In warm weather, if you are feeling hot, you may need to sit in the shallows (if possible) before exiting to help reduce your body temperature.

If possible, it is advised to get into a sheltered spot - so you are protected from any wind or chill. This could be your car.

It is also advisable to have a hot drink as soon as possible after swimming as this will help to maintain body temperature. You may also be low on energy so refuel with something sugary too. Before you eat or drink, wash hands using sterilizing wipes or gels.

COVID-19

Once you have finished swimming and exited the water, clean your hands with at least 60% alcohol gel. Again, ensure you maintain social distancing when you have exited the water.

To limit contact with other swimmers and surfaces, it is our current recommendation to prepare to leave site as soon as you have completed your swim. No extra-curricular or social activity should take place.

COLD WATER SWIMMING

When you get out of the water you continue to cool for approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Re-warming takes time.

- Be prepared for re-warming: bring dry warm clothes including hat, gloves and thick socks. Dry Robes are also a good investment for swimmers as they cut out wind and provide warmth while drying off and changing.
- Do not use foil space blankets to try and warm up. Cold swimmers do not radiate heat so there is no heat for the foil blankets to trap and reflect. Mediwrap blankets are more effective but are expensive and are single use so dry towels or blankets may be a better option.
- Bring a warm drink if one isn't provided, but bare cold skin should not be exposed to very hot surfaces (e.g. an uninsulated mug) due to the increased likelihood of developing chilblains.
- Re-warm gradually - don't worry if you shiver, shivering is good.
- Don't jump into a hot shower or bath. This can create a false sense of security, as the periphery feels warm but core may still be cooling. In addition, if a swimmer stays in too long this can result in fainting when standing up.
- Do not attempt to drive or ride a bike until you have re-warmed. If you need to leave before you have re-warmed bring a non-swimming supporter who can give you a lift.

Cleaning Yourself and Equipment

When you return home shower in fresh water in the earliest opportunity and again put on lots of warm clothes. This will remove all microbes, many of which are able to survive on the skin surface for long periods.

Rinse and wash all your kit in fresh water before drying thoroughly - including wetsuit, goggles, tow float, water bottle and swimming costume.

If you feel ill seek medical advice by calling 111 - including rashes for up to three weeks following your swim. Highlight that you have been swimming in open water and tell the operator the location that you swam in.

Leave it as you found it

Many of the places that you may open water swim in are beautiful locations and we want to keep them that way. Ensure you take all your belongings and leave the location as you found it. Take any litter with you and dispose when back at home.