



COVID-19 GUIDANCE TO OPEN WATER SWIMMERS

(Version 1: Tuesday 12th May 2020)

FOR ENGLAND ONLY



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 the aim is to give swimmers guidance on how to approach open water swimming in the current climate.

SWIMMERS GUIDANCE

Based on the latest government instruction on Coronavirus/COVID-19 as outlined in the government's paper OUR PLAN TO REBUILD: The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy, released on Monday 11th May. SH₂OUT will follow a range of adjustments in line with step one of the government plans which state that from Wednesday 13 May that you can meet one other person from a different household outdoors and exercise outdoors; with open water swimming in lakes and the sea permitted as long as you continue to observe social distancing guidelines and ensure you are 2 metres away from anyone.

Whilst open water swimming is permitted by the 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 don't advise that you go open water swimming outside of an operated and supervised venue which has a safety crew (many of these are not open currently).

Open water can include rivers, lakes, natural pools 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.
- Adhere to social distancing requirements throughout your swim, including arrival, changing and post swim.
- 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, there are no RNLI lifeguards operating presently. Volunteer lifeboat crews are fully operational but 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. Continue to look to the RNLI advice for sea swimming - <https://rnli.org/>
- Follow all the guidance outlined below.

Pre-Swimming

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: <https://www.sh2out.org/safe-venues/search?> A SH₂OUT accredited venue is one that has had its documentation, procedures, water safety provision and operations approved by SH₂OUT in 2019.

You can find another list of open water venues here: <https://outdoorswimmer.com/find/venues> Please note that SH₂OUT don't endorse or promote swimming at these venues, and cannot guarantee the level of safety at these venues.

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.

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.
- Look out for safety signs and online information/feedback.
- Avoid weirs, locks and other structures.
- If a sign says "no swimming" and/or "danger" don't swim there.
- Think about the water quality - is the water potentially polluted (e.g. looks dirty, is a strange colour or smells) or has any pipes running into it. Don't 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.

Equipment

For all open water swimming below 20 degrees, the wearing of a full body wetsuit is recommended. Wetsuits provide insulation against the cold, improving cold water tolerance and 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.
- Correct length in arm 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 high visibility swim cap again can help with being seen, which can be important if there are boats passing by.

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

When open water swimming, cover cuts and abrasions, however minor, with sticking plasters. Don't swim if you have deep cuts.

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. Strong winds can also make swimming conditions difficult, water can become unsettled, 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. SH₂OUT recommends that all open water swimming should take place in water at 11 degrees or above. At temperatures lower than this we do not recommend open water swimming. The reason for this is swimmers can experience a cold-water shock response when entering water, this can also happen above 11 degrees.

You can mitigate the risks posed by water temperature and weather conditions by acclimatisation - please see Equipment and Swim Entry below.

Whilst swimming

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. You also need to ensure you can find clear water and keep 2 metres apart from the person you are swimming with at all times.

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 breath deeply until you regain control. Your wetsuit and your tow float will help keep you buoyant.

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 take into account currents and tides.

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 degrees - 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 roll onto your back. This will help you float, then relax and wait until you recover.
- Your cold water acclimatisation/previous experience of swimming in cold water
- Your health and whether you have any pre-existing conditions that may affect your ability to cope with the open water swimming environment.
- You need to be able to maintain a distance of 2 metres from the person you are swimming with. 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.
- 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.

Post Swim

Recovery - re-heat plan and nutrition

Once you have finished swimming and exited the water, 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. 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.

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.

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 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.