

OPEN WATER SWIMMING

Open water swimming has both physical and mental health benefits for us all. Many people describe the feeling of intense satisfaction after plunging into cold water. It leaves the body tingling all over and helps clear the mind of worries and anxieties. Year-round swimmers are adamant that the sea has the potential to alleviate the effects of a number of physical ailments including arthritis, chronic pain and lots more.

When to Swim in Open Water

It is important to start in the summer when the water temperature in Ireland is somewhere between 14° and 18° degrees Celsius. The sensible way to acclimatise to cold water is to swim in it regularly. You can gradually extend the time of your stay in the water with practice. Get out if you are not feeling comfortable, and never set time goals for staying in the water. When entering the water, throw some water down the back of your neck to help prepare your body for the cold water immersion; this helps reduce the risk of cold shock or in extreme cases heart attacks. For the beginner or novice swimmer our advice is "Swim within your depth - stay within your depth"

Night swims have been organised during summer months in the past. These should only be undertaken by experienced open water swimmers as the dangers of swimming at night far outweigh the benefits. Swimming at night substantially impairs your visibility, as well as your ability to see rocks and marine life, such as jelly and weever fish. Lightsticks and tow floats should be used and there must be appropriate surface rescue with lifeguards, kayaks and safety boats commensurate with the number of swimmers in the water.

Water Temperatures

Sea water Temperatures can vary from approximately 5° in the Winter to 25° Celsius in a heat wave.

Freshwater temperatures can vary approximately 1° in the Winter to 27° Celsius in a heat wave.

For real time information on fresh water temperatures click on www.waterlevel.ie

For real time information on seawater temperatures and tides click on <http://www.marine.ie/Home/site-area/data-services/real-time-observations/tidal-observations>

Fresh Water versus Salt water

The salinity of saltwater gives you approximately 14% extra buoyancy in the water so it is easier to swim there than in fresh water. One cubic foot of sea water weights roughly 64.1 lbs. An equal amount of fresh water will weight 62.4 lbs.

Check the weather forecast and tides

You should always look at the wind and weather forecasts, then check the time and type of tides. Spring tides are more hazardous as they cause stronger rip currents on beaches and increase the risk of stranding. Use local knowledge to identify the location of the rip currents on your beach, or bathing area. It is much safer to swim on a rising tide than on a falling tide. Use an App on your phone, websites online or newspapers for further real time information about tides, e.g. tides near me

Use the weather buoys to give you an up to date picture of the weather before you go out - <https://www.irishlights.ie/technology-data-services/metocean-charts.aspx>

Knowing the weather forecast, particularly in the area you intend to swim in is essential. <https://www.met.ie/forecasts/marine-inland-lakes/sea-area-forecast>

At Low water you are more likely to be stung by a Weever fish sting when entering or leaving the water from beaches, especially on Spring tides.

At low water you are more likely to slip or fall on surfaces with algae on them both in fresh and salt water.

At High Water during the summer be aware of the possibility of an infestation of Jellyfish at your swimming location. Lions Mane Jelly fish and the Portuguese Man of War are potentially dangerous and in extreme cases can cause anaphylactic shock.

At High Water you are more likely to be bitten by a seal when swimming.

At High water you are more likely to encounter dolphins, in a playful manner they can collide with you and a number of people have been hospitalised as a result of these injuries. Use local knowledge to avoid these situations.

Further information on all these subjects at: <https://watersafety.ie/recreation/>

Never swim alone

Due to the unpredictable nature of our temperate climate, the sea can change very quickly, so never swim alone. If you swim alone and you get into difficulties, you are more than likely going to drown. Heed the advice given by regular swimmers. If they are not getting into the water as they feel conditions are too dangerous, then you should not enter the water. If you do get in to difficulty then remain calm, try and float or tread water, until you can either continue swimming or you are rescued by a passer-by.

Make sure you can be seen

It is essential that you wear bright yellow/pink swimming caps, similar to Water Safety Ireland recommended caps which are conspicuous to other water users in your vicinity. It is recommended you also use a bright tow float for visibility so that other Aquatic users can see them. Some swimmers can be naïve when it comes to their vulnerability in the water - be aware of other water users in the area nearby, particularly boats and jet skis. Depending on their speed, they can pose a real threat to you in the same way any vehicle would on the open road.

Alcohol and water never mix

Do not consume alcohol before you enter open water, 3 in 10 people who drown have consumed it. Alcohol severely reduces your ability to swim and respond to risks as it impairs your judgement. Similarly, while it might be appealing, do not attempt to swim in open water the day after drinking alcohol.

Warm up fast

Listen to your body and do not let yourself get too cold in the water. It is also important to understand that your body will react differently to the cold on different days. If you are tired, developing a cold or flu or have had a few drinks the night before you might start to feel colder, faster than usual when you are in the water. Tailor the length of your swim to how you are feeling on a given day.

Post-swim it is important to warm up as quickly as possible. Once you get out of the water you can continue to cool for approximately 20-30 minutes. This means that your deep body or core temperature will be cooler 20-30 minutes after your swim than when you got out of the water. Get dry and dressed in warm layers of clothing as quickly as possible. Warm drinks are also a great way to bring your body temperature back to normal. Bring a flask of your favourite hot drink with you.

Guidelines and Advice

Here are some helpful guidelines and advice for open water swimmers.

There are the guidelines of the 14 steps to safe swimming (not all applicable to Open water swimmers)- see www.watersafety.ie

For advice on cold shock / hypothermia and rip currents also see <https://watersafety.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Hypothermia-Leaflet.pdf>