

## 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 water shock. For the beginner or novice swimmer our advice is "Swim within your depth - stay within your depth. When entering the water, be fully prepared for exiting the water"

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 and appreciate hazards. 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](http://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 metre of sea water weighs approximately 1026kg. An equal amount of fresh water will weight 1000kg. (Metric standard)

### **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 can inflict severe stings.

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. Heed the advice given by regular swimmers. If they are not getting into the water due to conditions, then you should not enter the water. If you get into difficulty then remain calm, try and float or tread water, until you can either continue swimming or you are rescued.

### **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 similar to a vehicle 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 alcohol. 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.

### **Checklist to bring open water swimming**

- A silicone cap if dipping all year round, with an additional neoprene cap if distance swimming during the winter months.
- A dry absorbent towel.
- Ear plugs - especially in October to May.
- A tow float, even when swimming close to shore and especially at slipways and piers.
- A standing mat, particularly from October to May to counteract the severity of the cold ground while toting in and out.
- Floating goggles and a bottle of baby shampoo to rinse them off after each swim. This prevents fogging and increases visibility.
- A thermal flask containing a hot drink to ingest after exiting the water.
- A thermal beanie cap to wear immediately upon exiting the water and good warm clothing.
- Gloves.
- Booties or socks.

### **Guidelines and Advice**

A useful rule of thumb for beginner and novice open water swimmers is "Get in warm - get out warm".

More experienced open water swimmers should always remember, 2 minutes per water degree Celsius. So if the water is 14°C the maximum time in the water is 28 minutes; if the water is 6°C the maximum time is 12 minutes and only if you are feeling well. During the winter months we



recommend that you wear a neoprene cap, gloves, booties or socks and use floating goggles.

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

Open Water Swimming - Better Safe Than Sorry (Video) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDSZsp8BhdU>

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