

# BACK TO SWIMMING

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## Enjoy your first swim!

Now that lockdown restrictions have eased a little, many of us have either already been back in the open water or are thinking of going for a first swim.

Whilst it's exciting to be swimming again, it's tricky to know how to approach your first swim back; with events cancelled, training plans gone to the wall and worries about lost technique, it's easy to be overwhelmed.

But don't worry – you won't have forgotten how to swim! If you're an experienced swimmer, those thousands of repetitions will have forged their way into your nervous system and you may find that your stroke hasn't deteriorated much at all whereas the less experienced may need to take some time to re-establish their confidence, good stroke habits and re-develop their feel for the water.

As ever, it's crucial to follow safe outdoor swimming and current Government guidelines. It's tempting to rush back in and go all out to make up for lost time once you hit the water but your aim for your first swim should be simply to enjoy yourself.

Don't even think about missed training, cancelled events or lost technique, just remember how fantastic being in the water feels and allow yourself to relax, de-stress, have fun and just swim!

Once you're swimming more regularly it's important not to put pressure on yourself to 'get back to where you were' in terms of distance or speed too quickly.

You may find it harder to stay relaxed, to maintain your stroke or you might find yourself swimming more slowly – this is normal and to be expected but take care to build back up gradually.





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Remember that even though swimming is low impact it's still possible to overdo it and end up with an injury, particularly after a break. Start with swimming shorter distances than you were used to before lockdown so if you were swimming 60 minutes before, maybe start with some short 20-30min swims to remind your body what it feels like. Use these shorter swims to scan through your stroke and see what feels good and what doesn't. See if you can notice where you feel off balance or tense or where your movement isn't so good and use some focal points from your 'toolbox' to help get back on track.

A great way to regain your feel for the water is to go right back to basics – begin by working on posture – check in with Torpedo, is your head relaxed? Core engaged? Feeling tall? Move on to Superman to re-establish your balance and then work through the more advanced efficiency, streamlining and breathing skills. You'll soon find your stroke coming back together.

Most of all though, just enjoy the water. It's been a tough time for everyone, for many of us being in the water is about so much more than swimming and above all else, we're just very grateful to be back.

### Next steps (or strokes!)

Whilst our swim fitness levels may have changed during the lockdown, your swim can be more than simply a physical workout; a swim session gives us the opportunity to exercise our brains too. Being back in the water gives us a chance to find our flow, reconnect and redevelop our feel for the water and its myriad benefits.

For some people the lack of structure and longer distances involved in open water swimming can sometimes feel overwhelming and it can be more challenging to swim with a clear plan and purpose.

We've put together a few ideas about how to get the best mental and physical benefits from your open water swim:

**Mentally manageable chunks** – in open water it's easy to lose focus. Breaking up a longer distance into chunks and taking planned rests, allows you to maintain your form. Plan to swim from one buoy to the next or the one after or maybe a full circuit but stop if your brain wanders or your stroke deteriorates. Tread water or change stroke whilst you reset and then continue.

**A reason for repeating** – rather than aiming for distance, start with swimming a number of short loops, tune into your stroke, how does it feel? What's good? What's not so good?



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We are what we repeatedly do so learn from every repetition; repeats allow you to identify, explore and solve problems. Lots of repeats will increase the distance that we swim; our priority should be to repeat and reinforce high quality and effective movement patterns however this inevitably becomes more of a challenge as we fatigue and our stroke deteriorates so stay mindful of how you feel and take rests as required.

**Stroke counting** – instant feedback leads to better results - how many strokes you take to swim a given distance will give you important information about your stroke and efficiency, apply this along with a metric such as tempo, time or distance and you will instantly get invaluable data to help guide your practise. This is more challenging in open water but buoy to buoy or point to point will give you something to work with.

**Honing your skill** - focal point swimming –what is it that you are focusing on? When Sir Dave Brailsford became head of British Cycling in 2002 the team had almost no record of success: British Cycling had only won a single gold medal in its 76-year history. In the 2008 Beijing Olympics his squad won seven out of the ten available gold medals available and then matched this at the 2012 London Olympics. Sir Dave applied the theory of marginal gains; by breaking down everything that goes into competing on a bike, and then improving each element by 1%, you will achieve a significant aggregated increase in performance. Swimming technique can and should be approached with the same mind-set.

**Swimming drills** – a drill only works when it has a point! What drills are you doing and why? How is it improving your swimming? In the open water try doing a few repetitions of a drill before moving into whole stroke – what does this highlight and what impact does it have on your stroke?

**Increase the challenge** and sit on the edge of your comfort zone – this is where we thrive, we don't always like it, it's not meant to be easy – but it is where we need to be to grow and improve. Test your capabilities and limits.

### **Fitness is something that happens.....**

Now that you have hopefully managed to have a few swims and are starting to feel better in the water, your thoughts are most likely turning to rebuilding your swim fitness.

TI founder Terry Laughlin said “Fitness is something that happens to you while you practice good technique”, so whilst it's tempting to go all out, its crucial to keep your discipline and focus your swim on technique. It can be daunting knowing where to start so here are a few ideas.





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**You can't force fitness** - after many weeks without swimming make sure you take it slowly.

**It's all about technique** - remember swimming is a technical sport so keep focussing on your stroke and focal points. If the water is warm enough then definitely practice some drills, this might be tricky in the UK as the water is still quite cold so if drills aren't possible then make sure you swim with focal points.

**Don't try and do it all at once** – avoid swimming every day or doing 3 huge swims in a week. Instead, build up gradually; maybe add 1 extra swim each week, or 10-15min to your longest swim.

and mix up your swimming week so that each session is different and has a different purpose. Maybe try a short fast swim, a long swim, an easy swim, and maybe even some Fartlek (Swedish for speedplay) going fast/easy between the buoys.

**Structure it** - you can break down your open water swims into a structured set in the same way you do in the pool. So, set up a warm up, technique/focal points, main set or practice, ending/cool down.

**Break it down** - think about where you're swimming and break it down into sections or chunks. If say your lake is about 400m per lap, break it roughly into 4 sections with a tree, or a rock, or buoy to swim to for each section. If you swim in a river, perhaps swim to a bridge and back and in the sea swim between the groynes or to the pier and back. This just helps to chunk it down and give you something to focus on in each section – 'chunking' like this makes it easier to put in the efforts.

**Use your watch** so you can see how long your efforts/laps are. You can press the lap button after each section then you could try and match the time on the next effort.

**Use intervals** - start with short intervals of greater effort measured by time or distance or number of strokes. For example, try swimming 4 x 20 strokes = 100 strokes = 100metres = 2min (approximately). Followed by say 20 strokes super easy then build on this increasing time/distance.

**Focus!** - keep some focal points in your head while you're swimming - however hard/fast

**Swim straight** - check in with how straight you're swimming e.g. pick a buoy, close your eyes and do 30 strokes and see where you end up.

**Keep counting** - if you don't have markers or buoys then counting strokes is another way to break up a swim into sections - 20 strokes is roughly 25 metres for most people (adjust for your own stroke). So, 4 x 20 = 100m. So, you could do 20 strokes hard/60 strokes easy.



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We hope these tips are useful, for more help please get in touch. After such a long break it's easy to feel under pressure which can have a negative effect on our swimming so it's important to be kind to yourself, don't expect too much too soon and don't despair if things don't go to plan.

With that in mind we'll leave the final words to Total Immersion founder Terry Laughlin who wrote about how to see the positive in those 'off' days we all have:

*'The possibility for pleasure in such difficult discipline comes from the mental atmosphere you create around your practice. It is the expectation of improvement in small details coupled with the tools you are given to actually affect those improvements which set you up for satisfaction in each practice – even when you sometimes experience more failure than success.'*

*If you succeed you get the pleasure of feeling improved movement, improved flow of water around the body. If you fail, you gain insight into what details are standing in the way of your improvement and the opportunity to plan your next practice according to that insight.*

*Each practice can be a delight. As a matter of fact, it is not just the stroke you are improving, it is your method of practice you are improving – it's your attitude about a life of continual personal improvement. It is your whole approach to doing anything that is difficult, anything which involves skill, which offers you the choice to resist and suffer, or accept and improve your approach and be rewarded from day to day.'*

Happy swimming

