

Swimming for Exercise – Getting Started

I've given lots of non-competitive swimmers advice on how to get started when trying to use swimming as a workout. This document is a compilation of the advice I've given.

Your first step is to find a pool that works for you (location, cost, pool design). Once you find a good one, ask how crowded the lanes are during the lap swim or open swim hours. Having two swimmers in a lane isn't a problem (each swimmer takes one side of the lane). But with more than two swimmers you have to circle swim, which can be a real nuisance unless all swimmers in a given lane are of about the same speed and doing the exact same workout.

Getting Started

At the very beginning, you should just concentrate on your stroke form and gradually building your swimming endurance. Any prior running or cardio exercise experience will set you off nicely on the cardio aspect of swimming. Your first dozen or so workouts will mainly be getting your upper body (mostly shoulders and lats) into shape. For the first handful of workouts, just swim freestyle until you're fairly tired, take a 2 minute break and do it again. At first, this might be only 100-200 yards at a time but it should gradually increase by 50 yards per workout until you reach a total of 500 continuous yards in a workout. Now you're ready to move to the next step.

Extending your initial stamina - repeat each step for about 2-3 workouts

- Same 500 yds, but try to increase the speed 10-20% for the fourth 100 yds and then slow for the last 100
- Same as above but with a 30% speed increase for the fourth 100 yds
- Same as above but push yourself almost as hard as you can go for the fourth 100 yds

Adding distance

- Add 50-100 yards per workout, starting with a medium pace but increasing your speed for the last 200 yards. Rest for 1-2 minutes then swim 100 yards easy as a warm-down.
- Once you build up to 1000 yards, proceed to next step

Changing Things Up

Now that you have general swimming strength, endurance and reasonably good form, you're ready to vary your workout to avoid total boredom. People in their 30s or younger should start each workout with 200 yards of easy freestyle to get good blood flow through the muscles and to "lubricate" the joints. Add 100 yards for each decade older than this. My father jokes that eventually the warm-up is the workout.

Below are a couple of ideas for workout sets. Each idea can be repeated multiple times to generate the distance needed for your workout.

- **Staggered Length / Intensity:** 200 free (easy), 100 free (medium), 50 free (hard).
- **Different Strokes:** 100 back, 100 breast, 100 free, 50 back, 50 breast, 50 free (you can mix in butterfly if you can do it). 1 minute of rest in between each.
- **Kicks:** Using a kickboard, mix in 100-200 yards worth of kick in between other sets. You can switch from flutter kick to breaststroke kick every 25 or 50 yards. And if you want to work your abs a little extra, try dolphin kick but try to undulate your body from the hips down rather than just move your lower legs.

- **Pulls:** With a buoy between your thighs and hand paddles, you can work just your upper body. Go easy until you get used to the feel of the paddles and don't get huge paddles. Also beware that hand paddles amplify the strain on your shoulders so start really easy and gradually build your intensity over the course of months. And if you experience any pain at all, stop using them for a couple of weeks.

If the last set of your workout had some intensity, finish with 50-100 yards of anything you like but very easy in order to help dissipate some of the lactic acid buildup in your muscles.

Freestyle Stroke Advice

- Breathe to alternate sides every 3 strokes to help with stroke symmetry
- Hand entry should be slightly fingers first and with the hand entering straight in front of the shoulder or slightly wider (not in front of the head). See figure 1.
- After hand entry, initially reach further straight forward underwater. Then point your fingers down while leaving your elbow high. This positions your whole forearm and hand as a paddle with which to pull. One of the most common mistakes is to drop your elbow and only pull water with your hand. Propulsion comes from displacing as much water as possible from in front of you to behind you. See figure 2.
- During the stroke, don't allow your hand or arm to cross over the midpoint of your body. This reduces strength and can cause further strain to your shoulder.
- Don't forget the final push before removing your arm from the water. Your hand should exit the water next to your upper thigh, not your stomach or waist.
- On the arm recovery think about pulling your elbow up out of the water and then moving your hand forward in a straight line as close to the water as possible. One technique drill involves allowing your fingertips to actually drag along the surface of the water during the forward movement. See figure 3.



Figure 1 (hand entry)

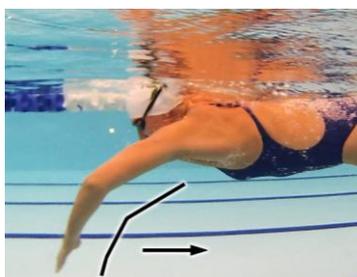


Figure 2 (hand/arm catch)



Figure 3 (arm recovery)

Equipment

You'll need goggles at a minimum and might need to experiment until you find the right brand and model that fits most comfortably. Your pool will likely have kick boards if you want to just use theirs. If you like the idea of the pulls, you'll want your own buoy and paddles. If you end up with enough of your own gear, you can buy a mesh bag to throw it all in for easy transport. You can also get a workout swim suit. But I recommend starting with whatever you already have and deciding later if you want or need a different workout suit.

- If your goggles start fogging more frequently, there are two things you can try. First, put a couple of drops of dishwashing soap in a bowl and stir vigorously with your finger. Then drop in your goggles, lightly rub the inside of the lenses, then generally shake the goggles around in the soapy water every 10-15 minutes. After 1 hour, remove and rinse well. While rinsing, lightly rub the inside of the lenses.
- If the above idea doesn't work, you can buy some lens defogging drops from the local swim shop.
- If your pool is outdoors and heated in the winter, you might want a swim cap. Silicon ones are a little more comfortable than latex ones. And women with lots of hair can find specialty swim caps just for this purpose.

Safety & Injury Prevention

Following is a list of things to keep in mind to help you stay safe and avoid injury.

- **Heart rate and dizziness** – If you're already a serious distance runner or triathlete, you'll already be in touch with your heart rate and the way your body feels when it's being pushed. If not, just realize that swimming utilizes just about every muscle in your body, which demands a lot of oxygen to feed your muscles. And since your head is underwater most of the time, you can't breathe in the same way you can while running or using a cardio machine in the gym. Be careful because pushing too hard could cause you to get dizzy or pass out.
- **Shoulder injury** – Swimming causes a concentration of strain on your shoulder muscles, ligaments and tendons. Don't push too hard too soon. Let your shoulders build up gradually and pay close attention to any acute pain because shoulder injuries take unbelievably long to heal and the worse they are injured the longer the recovery period.
 - Especially be careful if using hand paddles
- **Cramps** – When cramps happen they are usually in the feet or calves. There are a variety of theories on prevention. I personally try to make sure I'm sufficiently hydrated before the workout and try to stay hydrated throughout the workout (see next comment).
- **Dehydration** – Hours before your workout, drink plenty of water. During your workout, use your favorite sport energy hydration drink. I prefer G2 Gatorade because it has all the electrolytes but less sugar than regular Gatorade. Take a good drink between each set and drink at least 6-8 ounces within 30 minutes after your workout is done.
- **Energy & nutrition** – You should eat well before your workout. I like to swim in the early or late morning and try to avoid protein in my breakfast. Instead, I eat some healthy combination of cereal, fruit, yogurt and toast. Then, approximately 30 min before my workout I eat an energy bar or energy gel pack. Also try to eat within 45 minutes after your workout.
- **Ear aches** – If water doesn't easily come out of your ears when you get out of the pool, use ear drops. You can get them at any swim shop. It only takes 2-3 drops per ear.

While on Travel

Frequent business travel can really make it hard to keep a consistent swim workout routine. The best pool locator website I've seen for lap swimming is Swimmers Guide: www.swimmersguide.com. It allows you to filter by country, state and city. There must be thousands of listings all around the world. I've literally found good lap pools in Paris, Vancouver and Barcelona, not to mention dozens of US locations. The profile for each pool includes information like visitor cost, pool length, indoor/outdoor, pool website for more info, etc. And there are also reviews from other swimmers that have used the facility.