

Movement Methods: Swimming for Fitness

NOTE: The following article is excerpted from the book "It's Never Too Late" by Gail Kislewitz. More information about this book can be found at: <https://www.amazon.com/Its-Never-Too-Late-Personal/dp/1891369210>

Starting a swimming routine

Are you considering becoming a swimmer? Good choice! Swimming is probably one of the most healthy, fun, challenging and low impact forms of exercise you can do. Regardless of ability level and experience, people of all ages can swim. As we age, it is important to consider adding low impact, aerobic exercise to the physical fitness routine. Swimming is the ideal activity for many who can no longer bear the high impact and joint stress of running or jogging.

People sometimes worry about swimming's influence on weight loss. Skeptics say it's impossible to lose weight swimming, but it is possible. In fact, combined with a healthy balanced diet, swimming regularly can help people lose weight as easily as other physical activities, such as running. For people who are overweight, swimming is perhaps the best way to exercise because it alleviates stress on the leg joints. Swimming has the added benefit of providing a total body cardiovascular workout unlike any other.

When starting a swimming routine, as with any other physical fitness activity, make sure to consult with a physician. Start slowly and build up to increase the limits. Remember, the speed and distance is not as important as the amount of time you swim. According to the American Heart Association, just 30-60 minutes of physical activity 3-4 days per week can help reduce your risk for heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. A regular physical activity program can also help lower your blood pressure and cholesterol.

It is a good idea to monitor the heart rate while swimming. Start by determining a maximum heart rate. In healthy adults with no previous history of heart disease, the maximum heart rate commonly recommended by physicians is the number "220" minus the age of the individual. Once the maximum heart rate has been determined, check routinely while exercising. Check the pulse and count the number of beats during a ten-second period. Use a clock for better accuracy. After counting the beats for ten seconds, multiply the number by six to get the heart rate.

First Consideration – Equipment

Swimsuit. Most swimming facilities require swimming suits. Make sure to get one that is comfortable and durable. Several of the swimwear manufacturers offer fuller cut suits for swimmers who desire the less youthful styles. Some of the newer suits made of polyester will last longer and resist fading.

Goggles. Protect your eyes and see everything more clearly with goggles. Several manufacturers now make prescription goggles for people who need them. Goggles should be snug, yet comfortable. Sometimes it is necessary to keep trying new goggles until finding the right ones.

Fins. Work your legs and add propulsion to your swimming with fins. There are several kinds of fins to choose from. They should be snug fitting but not too tight. If you can't find the right size, get the slightly larger ones and wear socks with them. Long fins are great for beginners and people who need to develop ankle flexibility. Short fins are an alternative, and they are great for adding speed to your swimming without disproportionately overexerting the leg muscles.

Pull-Buoy. Put some flotation into your swimming by trying a pull buoy. This piece of equipment is usually made of foam and comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. It is placed between your legs above the knees and allows your lower body to float more while isolating your swimming to the upper body. If your legs tend to sink, or if they're just tired, a pull buoy can often help.

Kickboard. If you would like to work your legs exclusively, you can use a kickboard. This piece of equipment is usually made of foam and comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. It allows your upper body to float while you kick with your legs. If you try a kick board and find it makes your shoulders sore, try kicking without it, or try a smaller board with less flotation.

Start Slowly, and Build

Ease into the routine. During the first week try swimming for 30 seconds and resting for 30 seconds. Repeat, nine times for a total of ten.

Now try kicking: Try the same set as above while doing kicking. Just pick up some fins and go. Kick for 30 seconds and rest for 30 seconds. If you'd like to try a kickboard, most pools will have them available. If your pool doesn't have any, they are inexpensive and last forever.

Add Variety: Try varying the length of swimming/kicking time in relation to the resting time. When trying to increase the amount of time exercising, start by making the 30 second swimming time into 45 seconds while making the 30 second rest period into 15 seconds. Also, try different strokes, such as backstroke, breaststroke and even butterfly!

Watch the clock. Pools where competitive teams swim will usually have pace clocks installed. Most pace clocks have a sweeping second hand that is usually a bright color. If there is no pace clock, or if you can't see it from the pool, consider purchasing a waterproof watch.

Build your routine. Start with two or three days a week, and build your routine to include more days, if you are comfortable. Make sure to take enough rest to catch your breath in between repeats. If 30 seconds rest is not enough between swims, adjust your rest interval.

You can't swim too slowly. Swim comfortably and you will enjoy it for a lifetime. Don't worry about how fast other swimmers are, unless you are preparing to enter a lane with other swimmers. Be honest with yourself about the pace you are able to maintain. If you are not a fast swimmer, do not enter a lane with fast swimmers.

Moving Ahead

Consider the "ten percent rule" that runners often use. Avoid increasing your weekly distance by more than ten percent over the previous week. This may sound overcautious, but it works. If you follow it, you should avoid injuries due to over-training.

Set realistic goals. Aim for the attainable and you won't get discouraged. There are many ways to set goals in swimming. It could be as simple as learning to do the stroke better, or counting your laps. The most important thing is to have fun with it.

Technique. Swimming is far more technical than most other activities. Even the best swimmers continue to improve by refining their technique. It is often beneficial to have an instructor or a coach look at you while you swim. People who teach swimming often have suggestions about how to make your swimming more efficient and more enjoyable.

Lane Etiquette. Make sure you know the pool's rules about how to share a lane with other swimmers. When three or more swimmers are sharing a lane, do "circle-swimming". When you are circle-swimming, you go up on one side of the lane and return on the other. If you are not sure about it, ask the lifeguard, who is there to assist. Watching the traffic patterns is always a good idea before entering a lane with other swimmers.

Swimming with a partner or a group can help you stay motivated. If you're looking for a partner or a group, go to your local pool and ask about Masters swimming groups. Resources are available through United States Masters Swimming, which has a web site (www.usms.org). Joining a local Masters team is a great way to learn and add camaraderie to your fitness routine. You do not have to go to the competitions to enjoy Masters swimming, but swim meets for seniors can be great fun, too! Swimming is the most popular fitness activity for all ages. Remember, the cardiovascular benefits of swimming make you feel great. It is exhausting and energizing all at once, and you can do it your entire life.

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