



Triathlon PLUS

— BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO —
SWIMMING

**START
SWIMMING
FROM
SCRATCH**
AND RACE TRI THIS YEAR

**LEARN YOUR FIRST
SWIMMING DRILLS**

BEAT YOUR FEARS
LEARN TO LOVE THE WATER!

**GET READY TO SWIM
IN OPEN WATER**

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Triathlon PLUS WELCOME

BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO SWIMMING

FREE WITH ISSUE 56 / SUMMER 2013

“Whenever I meet other triathletes, I'm struck by the fact that swimming is almost always their least favourite discipline. In five years of competing, I've met just a handful of triathletes who love getting into the water. That's a shame, because the swim is what makes triathlon the ultimate challenge, a true all-rounder's sport. It shouldn't be the one part of the race most of us would rather forget.

So for this special guide we're going back to basics, addressing some of the issues that keep people out of the water in the first place, tackling the problems that keep you from progressing and outlining a few basic skills to get you started.

Unfortunately you can't learn everything you need to know about swimming by reading about it. That's why we're including a free DVD with issue 58 of *Triathlon Plus* – it'll help you nail the drills and techniques we detail in this guide, so you can really build on your new knowledge.

If you take your swim seriously, we recommend seeking the help of an experienced swimming coach, like the brilliant Keeley Bullock from Swim For Tri (swimfortri.co.uk) who helped with this guide, even if only for one session. You might never become the fastest swimmer but you can certainly enjoy becoming a true multi-sport athlete.

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CONTENTS

04 / LEARN TO LOVE THE WATER

Swim teacher Keeley Bullock on how to stop fearing tri's first discipline

08 / BREAK THE BARRIERS

Deal with the problems stopping you from becoming a great swimmer

12 / MAKE THE MOST OF EVERY SESSION

Short of hours to spend in the pool? Here's how to invest your time wisely

14 / START SWIMMING FROM SCRATCH

New to swimming? Don't do a single length until you've read this

16 / BASIC SWIMMING DRILLS

Six pool-based exercises to start working on your freestyle technique

20 / SIMPLE STRENGTH AND FLEXIBILITY

Dry-land moves to help you avoid injury and swim better

22 / GETTING READY TO RACE OUTDOORS

Stop feeling the fear and start experiencing the exhilaration

28 / ESSENTIAL KIT

Everything you need for the pool and outdoors swimming

30 / FIRST FITNESS SESSIONS

Five workouts for swimmers ready to start training in earnest

LEARN TO LOVE SWIMMING

BECOMING A GOOD AND HAPPY SWIMMER IS A LIFELONG JOURNEY, SAYS SWIM FOR TRI COACH KEELEY BULLOCK

IMAGES JAMES LAMPARD

As a youngster, I did pretty much every sport but it quickly all came down to swimming. I swam competitively from about seven years old as a club swimmer and quickly progressed. I was swimming around 14 hours a week – seven two-hour sessions before and after school – which is pretty full-on, but if you're going to do any sport to any level of competitiveness you need to be putting in the hours. Until 15 or 16 years old I loved it, but then it all changed. Being female, your body changes and you don't like walking around in a skimpy costume.

NOW I SWIM more recreationally. I had a shoulder operation a couple of years ago and I have to be careful. I've got too much flexibility, so my ligaments are stretched and, being an ex-butterfly swimmer, I've put too much stress through my shoulders. I'm swimming pain-free now, which is good, so I'm doing from a kilometre up to a mile a couple of times a week – nothing too hard, because there's the potential that my shoulder will stretch out of place again.

Once my head goes into the water, I love the freedom of not being on land. I have structural problems with my neck so I can be in quite a lot of pain, and swimming allows me to relieve that. I always feel a bit taller – I'm quite tall anyway, but I can stretch more. I don't really do any other form of exercise; I like walking but I don't go to the gym or anything.

What I love about swimming is the fact that it's just you on your own, facing the water. I find that when I get into it, it's almost trance-like. It enables me to just switch everything off in my brain. I'm the worrier in the business – there's always a bit of anxiety, and it enables me to calm my mind.

It also makes my body feel better; I always feel slimmer in the water, I don't

know why. It also enables me to feel tension more; I'm very aware in the water of what's going on in my body.

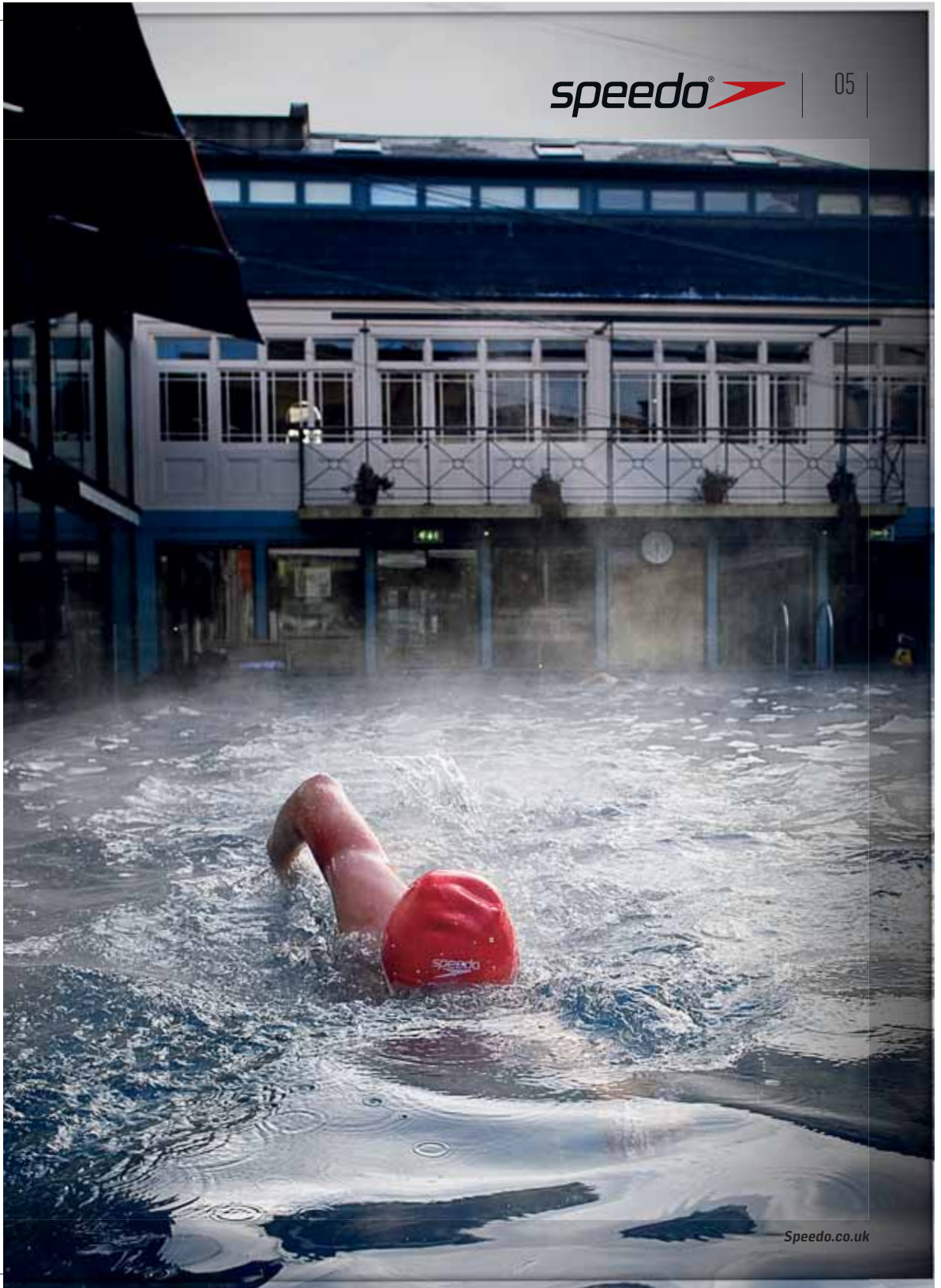
You can beat your fears

My real passion since I was a teenager has been teaching people who are scared of the water. They've often had an incident earlier in life: I had a client recently who had a swimming lesson at the age of five and her teacher pushed her into the water because she wouldn't get in on her own.

She's had this fear for 20 years, but she signed up for an open-water triathlon and she's really trying. In our last session, she actually swam a length with her face in the water and didn't swallow any – something she's never done before. Her face just lit up; that's why I do it.

The person who stands out the most for me is a lady who'd fallen off a sea wall as a youngster and had a fear of water for over 50 years. I'd taught her husband and one of her children, and she'd always said, "you'll never get me in the water". When she finally did come and have lessons, it took a couple to even get her in the water. She's not breathing completely independently yet but she can now swim unaided, so she can go swimming with her husband. That's the best part of what I do.







"THE PEOPLE I TEACH ARE VERY SENSIBLE ABOUT THEIR LEARNING AND KNOW THAT **IT NEEDS TO BE IN A CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT**"

You can teach someone to overcome their fear of the water, as long as they want to. The person has to be open and willing, and confident that they can achieve. After a while – if I talk to them about it enough – they'll start to believe that they can do well in the water, because there's no reason why they can't.

It doesn't have to be swimming lots of lengths. A lot of beginners see people swimming lots of lengths and think, "well, I can't do that". But those swimmers couldn't do that at the beginning; you've got to start somewhere. Doing even a couple of lengths is great. It's a fantastic starting point and you can build each time you go to the pool. It's good to give people that awareness of what they can achieve.

You don't need to throw yourself in

We get loads of people on training days who tell us, "I'm a really strong swimmer, I want to do the fitness stuff," and we tell them that if they've never done it before, they need to do the technique stuff first.

You can't argue with them at that point – though I have become a lot sterner in my old age, because within 20m they're coming back and it's too late for them to join our technique group.

We've done a lot of safety cover at triathlon races and we've done training days for the London Triathlon, so we've worked with the safety kayakers on the water at the big races. They tell us they pull out so many people who just haven't taken the time to go and practise in open water, whether they've got a fear of it, or whether they decide to just get in and do it and sod the consequences.

The people I teach are very sensible about their learning and know that it needs to be in a controlled environment. The pool we use is waist-height so they know they can stand up at any time, which is a good starting point. The plan is to go on into the deep end later.

It's not just about learning to swim well

If you can persevere with the technique, swimming has fantastic health benefits. I always say to people: "You may find it

frustrating at first but the fitter you become in the water, the more you'll benefit in everything you do on dry land." When I was younger, I was a decent runner with no real run training – it was all from my swim training. So if you do persevere, you'll find that your running and cycling will become even better.

QUICK TIPS

Triathlon Plus editor Liz Hufton says patience and practice are the keys to learning to enjoy swimming

1 SCHEDULE REGULAR SWIMS

When you're new to swimming, get yourself to a pool as often as you can. The more you're in the water, the more comfortable you'll be – you don't need to swim thousands of metres to benefit.

2 ASK FOR HELP

If you have a deep-rooted fear of water, don't try to face it down. Get the help of an experienced coach like Keeley, who specialises in helping swimmers get comfortable with water.

3 CHOOSE YOUR ENVIRONMENT

Swim in safe and controlled environments – warm, shallow pools close to home or work, where you can meet a friend for a chat and won't feel rushed or stressed.

BREAK DOWN THE BARRIERS

STARTING TO SWIM IS UNSETTLING, BUT BY RECOGNISING THESE COMMON OBSTACLES YOU CAN OVERCOME THEM

WORDS ELIZABETH HUFTON IMAGE CORBIS

Perhaps you've decided to take up triathlon and you have no worries about diving in at the deep end and dealing with the swim. However, it's more likely that you've been thinking about the swimming for months and it's the one part of the triathlon jigsaw that just won't seem to fall into place. If that sounds familiar, the key is to recognise the barriers to swimming well – and enjoying it – and to tackle them head on.

MENTAL BARRIERS BAD TEACHING

Unless you were lucky enough to have regular extracurricular swimming lessons as a child, there's a good chance your first experiences of swim teaching weren't great, and they could overshadow your attempts to learn now. "I used to do school swimming lessons – you'd get 25 minutes with a group of 30 kids, once a week," says swim coach Keeley Bullock, of Swim For Tri (swimfortri.co.uk). "If you've not been taught particularly well or you had a bad teacher, then you won't even know what you can achieve."

BREAK THE BARRIER

Get some good teaching! One-to-one lessons are best but if you can't afford them, go along to your local leisure centre – most run friendly adult learning courses to get you started.

FEAR OF THE WATER

Sometimes the memories that put people off swimming are worse than a shouting coach – maybe you had an accident at the seaside as a child, or you associate swimming with negative feelings due to friends ducking you at the pool. For some, it's even simpler than that. "When I worked in leisure centres, you could see the fear in the

faces of parents who were taking their children swimming," says Keeley.

"They were petrified! That's just going to instil more fear in the child."

BREAK THE BARRIER

If you've had an especially bad experience in the water, you'll need one-to-one help to help you overcome it, either from a swim coach like Keeley or from a sports psychologist. It can be done though, so the important thing is to get help and give it a go.

THE HASSLE FACTOR

A common complaint about swimming is the amount of hassle involved compared with cycling and running, which you can do from your own front door. You have to get to the pool, which has to be nearby, open and not too busy. Then there's the changing, showering and finding 20p for the lockers.

BREAK THE BARRIER

Find a pool that fits into your daily routine, ideally somewhere on the route between home and work. Get a long-term membership and hire a locker – you'll feel too guilty about wasting your money to avoid it.

OPEN WATER

When it comes to persuading yourself to swim in open water, there's a whole

"EXPERIENCE IS
THE BEST WAY TO
OVERCOME YOUR
FEAR OF OPEN
WATER, BUT KEEP
IT CONTROLLED"

host of mental barriers to overcome, says Keeley. "People don't like fish. They don't like the dark. They don't like swans. There's a whole load of stuff that can freak people out. I know people who'll only swim with their eyes shut and others who won't put their head in because it's too dark."

BREAK THE BARRIER

Experience is the best way to overcome your fear of open water – but again, keep things controlled. Swim with others and start gradually, with your first sessions just aimed at putting your face in the water and reassuring yourself that it's safe. Keeley advises keeping your first open-water swims to lakes, where there are no currents, waves or tides to worry about.



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"STEER CLEAR OF INTENSE SESSIONS AND BIG HAND PADDLES WHEN STARTING OUT"

PHYSICAL BARRIERS BEING FIT ON DRY LAND

Strength in cycling and running doesn't automatically translate to fitness in the water—something many new triathletes struggle to grasp. "You can be exceptionally fit on land, get into the water and be exhausted after half a length of swimming," says Keeley. "That can be very frustrating, especially if you're a high achiever and you're used to being good at things."

If you've been cycling or running for a long time, your well-developed physique could even work against you, as you won't have developed the strength and flexibility in your upper body needed to swim well, and your chunky leg muscles won't help you stay horizontal in the water.

BREAK THE BARRIER

They say patience is a virtue—and it's one you'll need in spades to become a good swimmer if you're already fit from other disciplines. "As an adult coming into the sport, it can take some time to develop good technique," says Keeley. "We've had some clients for 10 years. I remember one guy who started off in my lane [with the beginners] and he hated being there—he kept looking at the other lanes, like 'let me out!' Now he can do a sub-one-hour Ironman swim, whereas when he first came he could barely swim a length."

BREATHING

The hardest aspect of swimming for newcomers to tackle is breathing, says Keeley. "Water is so much heavier than air, but people don't remember that. They wonder why they can't breathe the same as when they're on land. I can get in and breathe when I want to because it's become natural to me—I did enough repetition as a youngster for it to be automatic. [But if you haven't got that



background] you've got to think about when you're turning your head to breathe, emptying the lungs effectively and not getting rid of the air too soon so you put more pressure on the lungs as the weight of the water comes in."

BREAK THE BARRIER

The first step to breathing well in the water is to relax—otherwise you'll hyperventilate and mess up your breathing. You'll need lessons to learn how to time your breathing, but a good starting point is to learn to breathe out completely while your head is under water, allowing you to take a full breath in when you turn.

INJURY RISK

It's a common misconception that, of the three triathlon disciplines, swimming is least likely to injure you. The delicate and complex muscles and ligaments around the shoulder are susceptible to overuse injuries and sudden tears, particularly if you don't have the best technique. Pushing yourself too far, too soon often plays a part, says Keeley. "I've seen people get in the pool without warming up and put huge paddles on and start swimming. It's like lifting a nice big weight without any kind of warm-up."

BREAK THE BARRIER

Focus on swimming little and often rather

than attempting marathon sessions straight away, and steer clear of intense sessions and big hand paddles until you've got a few months' conditioning and technique training in your muscles.

QUICK TIPS

Cheat your way to enjoying and becoming better at swimming

1 MAKE A DATE AND KEEP IT

Arrange to train with a friend—then guilt will push you towards the pool when you're thinking of skiving.

2 PLAN AN AFTER-SWIM TREAT

Tell yourself you only have to do 10 lengths, then you can hit the sauna.

3 LISTEN TO MUSIC IN THE POOL

Keep boredom at bay with a waterproof MP3 player like Speedo's Aquabeat (speedo.co.uk).

4 GET STRONGER ON DRY LAND

Make swimming easier by using a resistance band for two-minute bursts to replicate the freestyle action.

5 MAKE FULL USE OF POOL TOYS

Got sinky cyclist's legs? Use pullbuoys and fins for parts of your session to help you stay motivated.

MAKE THE MOST OF EVERY SESSION

YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO SPEND HUNDREDS OF HOURS IN THE POOL, SO MAKE SURE THE TIME YOU DO SPEND IS WELL INVESTED

WORDS ELIZABETH HUFTON IMAGES CORBIS

As someone new to swimming and triathlon, any time you can spend in the water is beneficial, even if it's just helping you to feel more comfortable. However, if you're not a keen or confident swimmer, it's easy for your pool sessions to lose focus and affect your progress. Here's how to make sure every minute in the pool makes you a better swimmer.

Be relaxed

Next time you go swimming, stop for a minute and observe the swimmers in the medium and fast lanes. You'll notice some people thrashing around and not moving very fast, while the faster swimmers

look smooth and unflustered, gliding through the water.

Feeling relaxed and calm is key to swimming well, especially in an open-water triathlon start, which can feel frantic and overwhelming. Keeley

Bullock, a swim coach with Swim For Tri, recommends trying to relax on your way to swim sessions.

"Before you go swimming, do some deep breathing—especially if you've had a particularly stressful day," she says. "You work better in the water when you're more relaxed. If there's tension, it's harder—the water will fight you every step of the way."

This is at odds with what many cyclists and runners coming into the sport will be used to—on dry land, being relaxed usually means going slowly. "That's why a



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lot of people who are very strong struggle in the water," says Keeley.

Go with a goal in mind

In the early stages of your triathlon training, you don't need to be ticking off dozens of sets or looking to achieve a particular time for 100m in the pool. But it is important to have a goal whenever you swim, to stop you having aimless sessions that are easy to cut short.

Your goal could be as simple as staying in the pool for a minimum of 15 minutes or repeating a particular drill for five minutes. When you're working on building up your swimming fitness, a good approach is to build up the number of laps you swim without stopping, giving yourself a progressively harder target each week.

Go with the right gear

An inexperienced swimmer is often a reluctant swimmer, and when you don't really want to swim there are endless excuses you can dream up to miss a session. Make sure you've got all the logistics covered so there are no practical reasons not to go.

Start with your kit. Buy two sets of goggles, caps and towels – all items that are easy to 'accidentally' leave at home – so you've got one at home and one at work (or in the car), and can make it to the pool wherever you are. If you've got as far as swimming with pool toys, which are valuable additions to many first-timers' drills (see page 16), then make sure you always keep them in the same place, ready to grab for your planned session.

Get coaching

No doubt you'll feel self-conscious about swimming if you're new to it, but don't try to struggle through your early sessions alone. Even if you can only afford a single one-to-one lesson with a swim coach, it could be the most valuable hour you ever spend in the water.

"People can have huge breakthroughs when they're coached," says Keeley. "Some people have major breakthroughs in one session – even people who resist it. At Swim For Tri we do a stroke count from one end of the pool to the other for our clients [the lower the stroke count the better, as it



"EVEN IF YOU CAN ONLY AFFORD A SINGLE LESSON WITH A COACH, IT COULD BE THE MOST VALUABLE HOUR YOU EVER SPEND IN THE WATER"

means the stroke is more efficient]. People can easily go from 30 strokes per length to 20 in a single 45-minute lesson."

Go with an open mind

If you're having swim coaching, forget what you've learned in previous schools or at least put it to one side for the duration of your course. Otherwise, you'll end up feeling confused and you won't gain as much as you could from your teacher.

"I love it when people question what we do – it's the best way for people to learn," says Keeley. "But I can remember one person in a group lesson who kept going on about another teaching school. In the end I had to say to him, 'I do appreciate that you've been to this other school, but these other eight people have come here to learn our way.' By all means tell your teacher if you're finding it hard to understand two different styles of coaching, but you have to accept what you're being taught and give it a try."

Go with a watch

Seeing progress in your swimming is essential if you're to stay motivated. In your first days in the pool, it's easy to measure your achievements in terms of how long

you're able to swim for without stopping or how comfortable you feel in the water. But after that, you may find it useful to have a swim watch and start doing some tests – for example, how fast you can swim 100m (four lengths of a standard 25m pool).

Try using a Speedo Aquacoach watch (£100) and keeping a log of your times over a couple of months. Some days you may feel that you're not getting anywhere, but then a quick look at your watch will show you've shaved a second or two off your time – a brilliant reason to keep going.

Do your homework

The best way to make every session count is to do more sessions. You're teaching your body new movements and that takes time. Practise often and follow your coach's advice, and you can see progress fast, says Keeley.

"If clients are putting the time in, the difference from week one to week eight is unbelievable," she says. "In week one their feet are on the floor, and by week eight they're at the surface. They may not be that fast, but they look like a completely different swimmer. They've been good with their homework."

Streamlining

"The first drills will be basic push and glide (see drills, page 16), maybe holding a float, putting your face in the water and learning how to streamline your body. This is a great way to start every length anyway; if you start badly it's only going to get worse; if you start well, over time the body will begin to understand what a good start entails."

START SWIMMING FROM SCRATCH

NERVOUS ABOUT YOUR FIRST SWIMMING SESSION, OR UNSURE WHAT YOU SHOULD BE DOING AS YOU LEARN FRONT CRAWL? SWIM COACH **KEELEY BULLOCK** TALKS YOU THROUGH IT

IMAGE CORBIS

How quickly someone can learn to swim really depends on the individual. Some people take to it like a duck to water – by the end of one lesson, they're swimming a length with no float or assistance.

IN THE FIRST lesson – assuming they're comfortable in the water and have just never learned to swim – I generally look at streamlining, leg kick and basic extension drill (for an explanation of these, see the annotations on the image), and that would probably be it.

If the student is confident to go away and recreate the movement on their own,

I'd suggest they see me once a week for three or four weeks, and ideally they'd need to be in the water every other day on their own for 20–30 minutes. The body needs to start learning the movements of swimming, and the only way that's going to happen is through frequent repetitions.

If you only train with a coach once a week – which is the case with a lot

of people juggling work and family lives – unfortunately you've got six days of unlearning to cope with. Sports psychologists kindly tell us it takes something like 15,000 repetitions to learn one movement. With swimming, you've got the legs, the arms and the rotation, and you're in an environment you're not that keen to be in – that's a lot to learn.

Breathing

"In general, I teach people to breathe out through the nose. However, I personally breathe a little bit out through my nose and then out through my mouth – more of an explosive breath – so I always give my clients the option to do that. We get comfortable starting with a slow out breath and getting stronger towards the end so we get that last bit of air out."

Bodyrotation

"I might get first-timers to do a basic extension drill (see page 16), which is an upper body rotation drill. If the person is moving quite nicely and kicking, I might get them to do it without fins on. This drill will build in a bit of rotation, and help with turning the head to the side in order to breathe."

Kicking

"Even in triathlon, there are different schools of thought with regard to kicking. At Swim For Tri we believe that if you don't kick your legs, it's much harder to create rotation. We find that most adults have a horrendous leg kick. I always start with how we want the legs to move on the kick – working from the glutes and the hip flexors, keeping the kick nice and shallow, and not worrying if you're moving forwards quickly. The important thing is that you're moving forwards, because if you flex the feet and bend the knees it's quite easy to go backwards!"

A close-up, action shot of a swimmer in a pool. The swimmer is wearing blue goggles and has their right arm extended forward, creating a large splash of water. The background shows the blue water and lane lines of the pool.

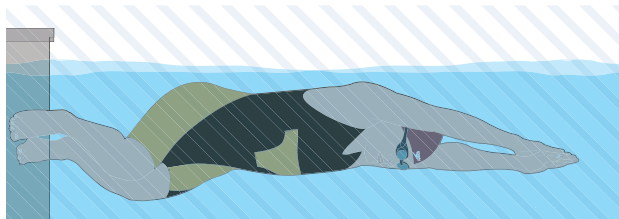
BASIC SWIMMING DRILLS

NO MATTER WHAT YOUR LEVEL OF SWIMMING
EXPERIENCE, YOU'LL ALWAYS BENEFIT FROM
PERFORMING DRILLS AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK
TO WORK ON YOUR TECHNIQUE

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“WHEN YOU SWIM FREESTYLE YOU SHOULD BE
ROTATING YOUR WHOLE BODY FROM THE HIPS
TO CORKSCREW THROUGH THE WATER”



▲ PUSH AND GLIDE

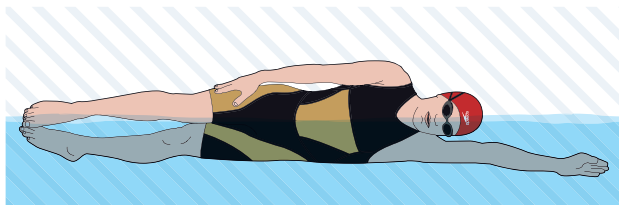
GOOD SWIMMING IS as much about reducing resistance in the water as it is being strong and fit. This simple exercise gets you thinking about your body position and how to streamline it.

Push off from the wall of the pool and try to travel as far as possible before you need to start swimming.

Before you push off, place your hands one on top of the other, above your head. Make sure your palms aren't facing forwards, or you'll put the brakes on your

movement. Tuck your head under – you can use this drill to test out different head positions and find out whether looking straight down, slightly forwards or slightly behind you works best for you.

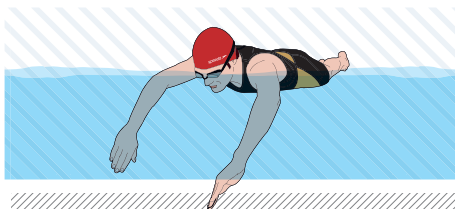
Once you've pushed off, point your toes and turn your feet in so the toes of each foot slightly overlap each other. Keep your knees straight but don't lock them, as tensing up could slow you down. Use this action to start other drills, such as catch-up and kick drills.



▲ BASIC EXTENSION DRILL

THIS DRILL IS designed to improve body rotation. When you swim freestyle, instead of being flat in the water with your chest facing down, you should be rotating your whole body from the hips to corkscrew through the water. This enables you to reach further with your leading arm and to turn your head out of the water to breathe, as well as reducing drag. To perform the drill, turn so that the

front of your body is facing the side of the pool. Ensure your hips and shoulders are facing in the same direction, so you're not twisted at the waist. Maintaining your horizontal position in the water, extend your lower arm and gently kick down the pool. If your kick is weak, use fins so you'll keep moving and be able to maintain your position. You can also use a kick float held in the extended arm to give you support.



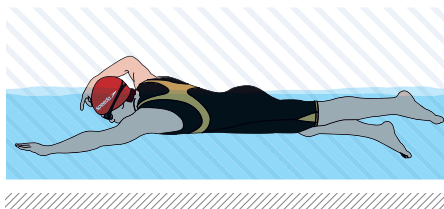
▲ SCULLING

SCULLING IS OFTEN one of the first skills taught to new swimmers because it's a great way to think about your body position and feel for the water. This will help when you work on your 'catch' – the start of your stroke after your hand enters the water. To perform this drill well, you need to relax and forget about propelling yourself forward, although you should move slowly as you do it.

Extend your arms out in front of you with a slight bend

at the elbows. Your fingertips should be pointing forwards and down – make sure your wrists don't drop. Move your hands in a figure-of-eight movement as if mixing hot and cold water in a bath.

If your legs keep sinking, use a pull buoy (see page 28). If you start going backwards, check that your forearms are below your elbows and your fingers are below your wrists. That's the position you should aim to maintain throughout your freestyle stroke.



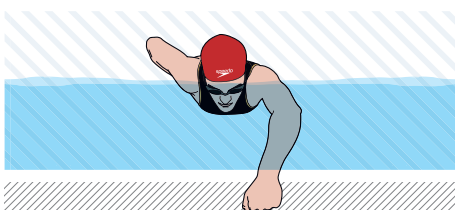
▲ CATCH UP

ONCE YOU'RE STARTING to feel more confident about your body position, rotation and breathing, the catch-up drill is a great way to start to bring your stroke together. It allows you to focus on your arm action and to start thinking about catching and pulling through the water.

Start by doing this drill with a float if you're worried about sinking or slowing to a halt. Hold it straight out in front of you, with your face in the water. Pull through a

stroke with your right arm, and as it exits the water and your body turns, let your head follow, turning (not lifting) out of the water so you can breathe. As the lead hand returns to the float, repeat the action on the other side.

Once you're happy with this drill, try it without a float, as this usually enables better body rotation practice. You may need to kick harder than usual to stay balanced in the water. Remember not to bend your knees.



▲ CLOSED FIST

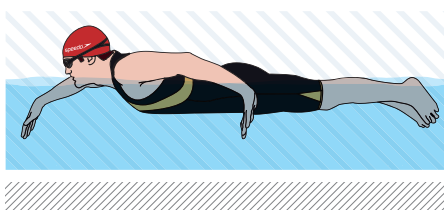
THIS MORE ADVANCED drill is for swimmers who are already reasonably happy with their basic front crawl technique and want to work on their catch.

Put simply, fist drill is swimming front crawl with your hands balled into fists. This means you can no longer rely on your palms and fingers to act as paddles, and instead have to use your forearms to pull yourself through the water.

This forces you to think

about the position of your elbow and forearm. Keeping your elbow high and bringing your forearm to near vertical will be the most effective way to power forwards, but it'll take a lot of practise to learn the right position to move quickly.

Do half a length of fist drill followed by half a length of normal freestyle – you should find that you're much more efficient with your usual stroke after just a few lengths of fist drill.



▲ HEAD UP FRONT CRAWL

THIS IS ANOTHER advanced drill that helps you work on your catch. It also recruits the big muscles in your back and shoulders so your arms aren't doing all the work (which can lead to injury). You'll also hear it called the 'water polo drill'.

As well as working on recruiting the right muscles, it's a great way to learn to navigate in open water, as you'll need to be able to look up to sight landmarks when you're racing.

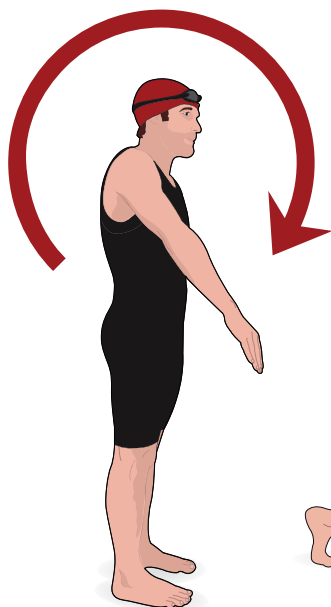
Start off with short distances to get this drill spot on. Swim five strokes, then lift your head and look directly in front of you for two strokes. Concentrate on levering your fingers behind your wrist, keeping your wrist under your elbow, and pushing towards your hip.

Once you become stronger you can make this harder using paddles, but only use a model that's slightly bigger than your hand or you could strain your shoulders.

SIMPLE STRENGTH & FLEXIBILITY

YOU DON'T NEED TO SPEND HOURS TRAINING ON DRY LAND, BUT ADDING A FEW QUICK EXERCISES CAN SPEED UP YOUR PROGRESS

ILLUSTRATIONS PHIL NICODEMI



1 / WINDMILL STRETCH

OPINION IS DIVIDED as to the effectiveness of static stretching, but using dynamic exercises can both improve your flexibility for swimming and act as a good warm-up. For this stretch, stand with your core engaged (activate your stomach, lower back and pelvic floor muscles), keep your lower back still and relax your shoulders and arms. Windmill your arms forwards for 10 seconds, then backwards.

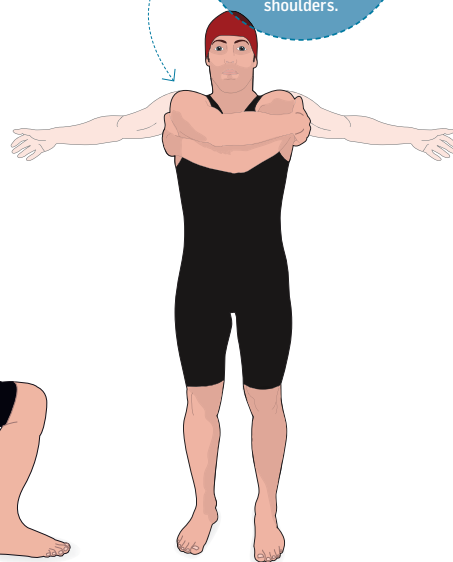


2 / HIP FLEXORS STRETCH

WHEN YOU'RE TRYING to stay horizontal in the water to reduce drag, tightness in your hips pulls your legs forwards and down; stretching your hip flexors avoids this. Settle into the position shown, with your lead leg angled 90° at the knee and your other leg stretched out behind you. Keeping your body vertical, push your hips forward, squeeze your glutes and feel the stretch through the front of your hip.

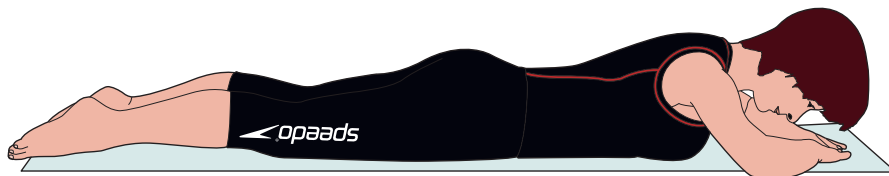
3 / CHEST SWINGS

Swing your arms in and out horizontally for 20 seconds at a time to warm up and stretch your chest and shoulders.



OPTIMAL EXTRAS

You may have tried yoga or Pilates to help with flexibility for your running and cycling, but they're just as beneficial for swimmers, says Keeley Bullock of Swim For Tri (swimfortri.co.uk). "For swimming you want mobility, but you need strength as well. Pilates is fantastic – you get more awareness of what your body's doing and build strength through the core. Yoga is good too because it's more of a controlled stretch. Bikram yoga, which you do in a heated room, is good for people who aren't so flexible."



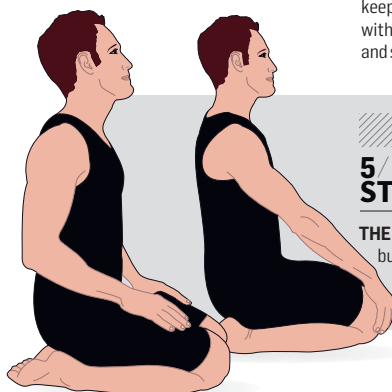
4 / THE SWIMMER

THIS APTLY NAMED Pilates exercise is great for developing a good swim kick,

according to coach Keeley Bullock, because it boosts strength in the core and glutes. Lie on the floor face down, resting your head on your forearms. Engage your core, raise your head while exhaling, then raise your legs slightly off the floor, keeping your pelvis and ribs in contact with the ground. Take shallow breaths, and slightly raise one leg at a time on

each out-breath in a fast rhythm—as if you were swimming.

Keep your core engaged and hips still throughout. Try keeping it up for a minute at first. As you get stronger, involve your arms—stretch them out in front of you, slightly off the floor, and slightly raise the right arm as you raise the left leg, and the left arm as you raise the right leg.



5 / KNEELING STRETCH

THE KNEELING STRETCH looks easy but it can be a simple yet powerful stretch for people with inflexible ankles (and let's face it, if you

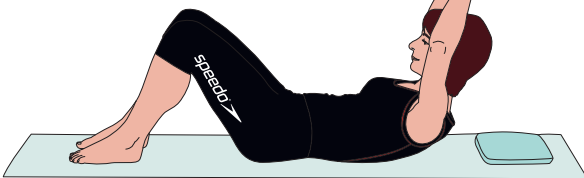
come from a running background, that's most probably you).

In a kneeling position on a soft surface, place your feet out straight behind you. If you're inflexible through your ankles you'll feel the stretch through the top of your feet and up to your shins. You can lift one knee at a time to develop this stretch further.

6 / CURL UPS

THESE WORK YOUR core and abs, and stabilise your shoulder blades. Lie on your back with your spine in neutral (upper back on the floor, lower back slightly curved) and feet hip-width apart. Engage your core, tuck your chin to your chest and curl your upper body up, one vertebra at a time, until the tips of your shoulder blades are just on the ground. Use your stomach to curl up, not your hips. Place your hands on your knees and keep your eyes on your pelvis to check you haven't tilted.

As you breathe out, bring your arms to your ears. As you breathe in, circle your arms in your peripheral vision and place them back on your knees. Repeat up to eight times before curling back down. Keep your curl-up constant throughout, your centre engaged and your shoulder blades connected to your ribcage.



"YOU NEED TO
PRACTISE IN AN
OPEN-WATER SETTING
AND IDEALLY WITH A
PROPER COACHING
GROUP"

GETTING READY TO RACE OUTDOORS

OPEN-WATER SWIMMING HOLDS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE IN TRIATHLON BUT IT ALSO OFFERS THE LARGEST REWARDS

WORDS ELIZABETH HUFTON / KEELEY BULLOCK IMAGE JAMES LAMPARD



FEEL READY FOR THE RACE

Keeley Bullock,
Swim For Tri coach, says:

"WHEN I'M COACHING someone who's getting ready to race in open water, the first thing to do is to get them comfortable with what they need to do by analysing it in the pool. When we're at the stage when they're happy with the distance, we start doing water-polo drills [see page 16] and

other drills that'll help them see where they're going. I have them practising different breathing techniques so they're not just relying on one method. For example, if they're going to be swimming in the sea, it'll help if they can turn away from waves to breathe.

"I like to see my athletes in their wetsuits, either in a one-to-one session or outside; we see so many bad-fitting suits. I also give them little bits of advice like wearing two hats, and putting their goggles on over the first hat so people can't pull them off. The main thing, even in the pool, is to

get people to stay as relaxed as possible in the water, get them to stretch out their stroke and not try to rush it. So even if something was to happen in the race, like someone swimming over their legs, they could still stay calm.

"You need to practise in an open-water setting and ideally with a proper coaching group. If you're 'pre-warned' you can cope a lot better in a race, even if you just go to a lido with a few friends and beat each other up a bit beforehand! You have to know what it's like to have people swimming up behind and around you."



Speedo.co.uk



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EMBRACE THE WILD WATER EXPERIENCE

Elizabeth Hufton,
Triathlon Plus editor, says:

"MY FIRST EXPERIENCE of swimming in open water was for a photoshoot. The water temperature was 9°C – the lake had been due to open to the public that day but had been kept shut because it was too cold. We only spent 10 minutes in the water, trying on wetsuits and getting some shots, and I remember shaking with fear and cold before we even stepped in. My overwhelming impression, though, was that it was nowhere near as bad as I'd expected – but then, how bad could 10 minutes be?"

"I found out a few weeks later, taking part in my first open-water triathlon. It was about as safe and controlled as an open-water swim can be – in a laned lido that formed part of a lake – but the cold, the race-day adrenaline and the green

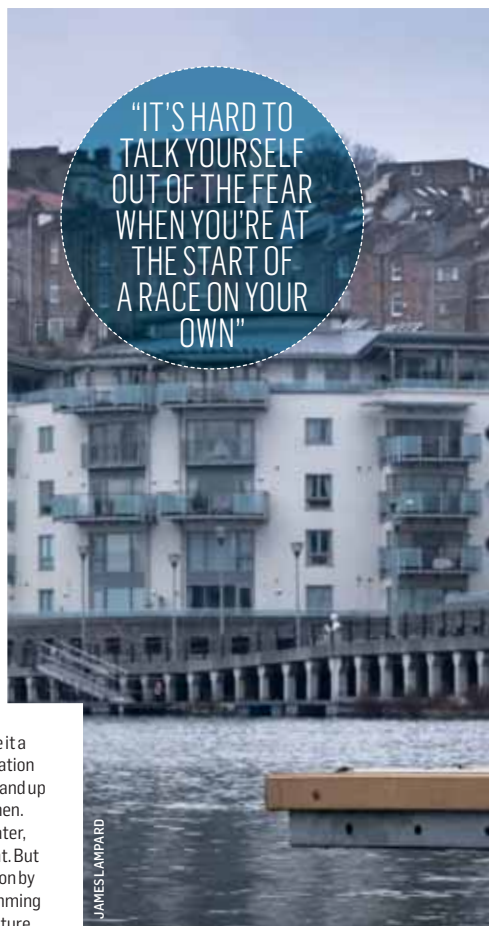
murk of the water combined to make it a hellish 400m swim. The only consolation was that it was shallow enough to stand up and take a breather every now and then.

"It's natural to be afraid of open water, and I think everyone is to some extent. But you can turn that fear into exhilaration by experiencing the best that wild swimming has to offer. Turn it into a little adventure. Start small, with a manmade lake where you can swim with friends under supervision. Take a Thermos so you can get out after just a few minutes and grab a cuppa.

"Try swimming in beautiful places – coastal spots and safe (and legal) river swimming areas. As long as you're well equipped, you'll grow to love that feeling of catching your breath as the cold water hits you and the freedom of being able to swim without stopping (no lane ropes, no rude pool users, no lifeguard's whistles).

"If you're really nervous, you can even take your first race this way – you don't have to rush off at the gun, as long as you're prepared to make the time up back on dry land – and there's nothing like the wide-awake feeling

"IT'S HARD TO
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OWN"



JAMES LAMPARD

you get after an open-water swim to fire you up for the bike and run legs."



ENJOY SWIMMING IN THE PACK

Keeley Bullock,
Swim For Tri coach, says:

"IF YOU'RE NOT a confident swimmer, there's nothing wrong with listening to the gun go, letting the pack start and then starting in your own time. You'll probably find yourself overtaking people within 100m or so anyway.



“THERE'S NOTHING LIKE THE WIDE-AWAKE FEELING YOU GET AFTER AN OPEN-WATER SWIM TO FIRE YOU UP FOR THE BIKE AND RUN LEGS”

“Pick your time, pick your position and make sure you know how you're going to swim around the buoys – if everyone's going around the inside, you might be better off swimming around the outside,

even if that means you have to go further. It's a tough one to psyche yourself up for being in the middle of the pack.

“A lot of my clients fear the water, so in the pool we do a lot of breathing exercises and we count so they can forget bad experiences they've had. But it's hard to talk yourself out of the fear when you're at the start of a race on your own.

“Count your arm pulls so your mind has a focus. Calm your breathing down. Count your out-breaths. If you focus on getting air in you can end up hyperventilating, but if you make sure you get the breath out, you'll get air in when you turn your head. Some people like to sing when they're

HOW TO... PUT A WETSUIT ON

It's surprisingly easy to put a wetsuit on wrong, and doing so can slow down your swim. Here's how to get it right – it takes about 10 minutes, longer if you're hot.

- 1 Put lube over your shins, calves, ankles, forearms, wrists and the back of your neck. Then wipe it off your hands
- 2 Put plastic bags over your feet
- 3 Pull the legs of the wetsuit on (zip at the back) and pull the bottoms of the legs a good inch or two above your ankles. Pull the plastic bags off
- 4 Work the legs of your wetsuit up like a pair of tights – slowly, and trying not to snag with your nails. Work out any wrinkles as you go up
- 5 Make sure the crotch of the wetsuit is right up where it should be
- 6 Wiggle your bum and hips into the wetsuit – usually the hardest bit!
- 7 Put plastic bags over your hands and repeat the process with your arms. Make sure the tops of the wetsuit arms are right in your armpits. Pull the plastic bags off
- 8 Get someone else to zip you up, stick the pull strap to the Velcro at the back of your neck so you can grab it easily, and then stick the Velcro down
- 9 Swing your arms round a bit to make sure it's on properly

swimming too. You need something to take your mind off what's going on.”

“If you've trained the distance and done all the practice but something goes wrong in the race, swim a little bit of catch-up drill. It's a good trick when there are lots of people around you because you've always got one arm in front protecting your head.”



BREAK THE RULES SOMETIMES

Elizabeth Hufton,

Triathlon Plus editor, says:

“AS A NEW triathlete, there are certain ‘rules’ you'll hear over and over again about open-water swimming, but when

"YOU SHOULD
USE YOUR FIRST
TRIATHLON RACE AS
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OWN OPEN-WATER
RULES"



© CORBIS

you get into a real race situation they don't always make sense.

"I'm not talking about the actual race rules, which of course should be obeyed to the letter (make sure you read them before you set off for your event). I mean things like, 'never rely on other swimmers to show you the way'.

"Sighting is one of the trickiest things to master in open water, and if I'd followed other swimmers more often instead of repeatedly trying to spot the same tree on the distant shore, I'd probably have a lot better race times to my name. You should always check out the course before you get in, but as long as the

"AS LONG AS THE
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swimmer in front seems to be heading the right way to begin with, you're probably pretty safe to sit behind them.

HOW TO... GET INTO THE WATER

Most people have a bad first open-water experience because the whole thing comes as a shock. Here's how to ease yourself in for the first time.

- 1 Choose a 'safe' location like a manmade lake. If it has changing facilities, even better!
- 2 Get your wetsuit on properly (see page 25) and have warm clothing and hot drinks available for when you get out
- 3 Wade into the water if possible. If you're going in off a pontoon, dangle your legs in for a minute before gently dropping in
- 4 Splash your face with cold water. Usually, this will take your breath away – this is completely normal, but it's important not to panic
- 5 Drop into the water properly and allow water to come into the wetsuit down the neck – it feels cold at first, but trapping this water is what will keep you warm
- 6 Take a few deep breaths and put your face in the water, breathing out slowly underwater. Do this a few times until your breathing is under control
- 7 Spend a few minutes alternating easy swimming with treading water. Enjoy the warmth and support of your wetsuit – they're usually much more comfortable in the water than they are on dry land
- 8 Get out after 10-15 minutes at the most, dry off and get changed quickly, and treat yourself to a hot drink. Easy!

"While we're at it, that rule about not completely lifting your head to sight can be ignored too. Lifting your head does break up your stroke and does slow you down. But sometimes, especially when you're new, it's quite nice to take your head right out, take a big breath and really see where you are.

"You should use your first triathlon race as a test event and work out your own open-water rules. I expected to be really freaked out by having other people around me when I first took up tri, but as it turned out, I was actually more frightened to find myself alone. That's the kind of thing you only learn through giving it a go and being prepared to write your own guidelines."

ESSENTIAL KIT

GET YOUR TRIATHLON SWIM TRAINING OFF TO THE BEST START BY MAKING SURE YOU'VE GOT THE RIGHT GEAR

IMAGES SPEEDO

SWIMMING MASK

SPEEDO RIFT PRO MIRROR MASK, £20

You can wear your usual goggles when swimming outdoors, but you may find it easier to wear a swim mask or wider goggles, designed to offer a wider field of vision so you can see swimmers around you. It's sensible to have a dark mask or pair of goggles at the ready for sunny days, as glare off the water can make it hard to navigate otherwise. www.speedo.co.uk



GOGGLES

SPEEDO SPEEDSOCKET GOGGLE, £19.50

For pool swimming, choose a set of goggles with clear or yellow-tinted lenses to help you see well in low light. Fit is the most important thing to consider when you're buying goggles, so go for a set that's easy to adjust and comes with different sized nose bridges which you can swap out to find the best fit for your face.

SWIMMING CAP

SPEEDO PLAIN MOULDED SILICONE CAP, £4

You might not like wearing a swimming cap but in a triathlon race you'll have to wear one in order to identify yourself as a competitor, so it's best to get used to it in the pool. A swimming cap is unlikely to keep your hair dry but it will dramatically reduce drag.

SWIMMING TRUNKS/ COSTUME

SPEEDO MEN'S RAPID MOTION PLACEMENT PANEL JAMMER, £32

It's time to mothball your board shorts or bikini – when you're training seriously in the pool you need close-fitting performance swimwear. The more you cover up, the less drag you'll create in

the water, so women should go for high-necked swimming costumes and men should try tight knee-length jammers. Look for durable fabrics that can withstand repeated wear and rinsing.

FINS

SPEEDO BIOFUSE TRAINING FINS, £20

Fins make it easier to swim fast by increasing the propulsion of your kick. They can also make you more aware of your leg

PULLBUOY

SPEEDO ELITE PULLBUOY, £11

A pullbuoy is a float that you hold between your legs so you don't have to kick. Use them so you can focus on your upper body technique and, later, so that you can work on upper body strength.





TRISUIT SPEEDO LZR RACER TRI COMP SUIT, £75

All-in-one tri suits are used for racing pool triathlons – so that you don't have to get changed – and are also worn under wetsuits when swimming outdoors. After your swim you just pull off the wetsuit and you're ready to ride and run. They usually have a thinner version of the padding found in bike shorts, so they'll give you some protection from the saddle without hampering your run. Tighter suits with minimal or covered pockets are better low-drag options for pool races. You can also buy tri suits as separate tops and shorts, a good idea for comfort in longer races.

action, helping you improve your ankle flexibility. "Training fins are fantastic for technique work and we recommend them for all our courses," says Keeley Bullock of Swim For Tri (swimfortri.co.uk). "Don't get long scuba fins, because they're going to have a different effect." Make sure your training fins are short but flexible, and check that your pool allows their use before you invest.



PADDLES SPEEDO BIOFUSE POWER PADDLE, £14

You may have seen these used by the faster swimmers in your pool. They can help experienced swimmers build upper body strength, but beginners should use them with care. "Newcomers don't need paddles," says Keeley. "Paddles are for when you're doing fitness work. You can also use them for technique, but at a later stage, and we recommend the ones that closely fit your hands. You should always warm up before using them."

KICK BOARD SPEEDO KICK BOARD, £11

A great tool for beginners, kick floats allow you to perfect kicking from the hip. You can also use them for catch-up and extension drills (see page 16).



WETSUIT SPEEDO TRI COMP FULL SLEEVED, £230

After your bike, your wetsuit is the most expensive investment you'll make in triathlon kit. The purpose of a wetsuit is to keep you warm, but many weaker swimmers like them for other reasons. They're very buoyant and keep your body in a good horizontal position. They're also often made with smooth outer layers to reduce drag and features on the forearms to help you 'catch' the water. On dry land, your wetsuit should feel tight – otherwise it's going to gape when you get in the water, let too much water in and create resistance. If possible, visit a specialist shop to try on a few models before you buy – some retailers such as Royles (royles.biz) even have endless pools so you can check what it feels like to swim in your chosen suit.



YOUR FIRST SWIM SESSIONS

ONCE YOUR TECHNIQUE STARTS TO TAKE SHAPE, YOU CAN BEGIN THE PROCESS OF BUILDING YOUR TRI SWIMMING FITNESS

During your first lesson in the pool, becoming a good swimmer can seem a very long way off. But one day, a few weeks or months down the line, you'll turn a corner and realise you've become a swimmer. You can manage a couple of hundred metres without stopping, and you're not gasping for breath at the end of every lap.

YOU SHOULD CARRY on your technique work – the world's best swimmers still spend hours every week analysing and working on their strokes – but you can now afford to start building up the volume and intensity of your sessions ready for your next tri race.

"You need to get into some structured training," says swim coach Keeley Bullock. "There are lots of clubs you can join to help this. Structure makes it more enjoyable to train – having come from a purely swimming background myself, doing 14 hours in the pool each week, I know it can get pretty mind numbing."

These five sessions should all take less than 40 minutes and will help you prepare for a sprint or super-sprint triathlon. Try doing one or two of them each week, as well as your one or two technique-based sessions or lessons.

1 The time trial

Keeley recommends introducing a regular 400m time trial to your training. If possible, have a friend operate the stopwatch (and count your laps as well) as that will give you a more accurate result. Remember to start and finish with 200-300m of easy swimming, which could include some drills. Do the test every three or four weeks and record your times – an improvement of even a few seconds over the distance is an achievement.

2 The pyramid

Learn how to pace yourself in the water with a pyramid session. After an easy 200m warm-up using mixed strokes, swim 25m, 100m, 200m, 400m, 200m, 100m, 25m – all as fast as you can over each distance, and with a 30-second rest in between. Over time you'll get better at distinguishing between the pace you can maintain for one length and the speed endurance pace you can manage for 400m. This session will also teach you to swim hard when you're tired, which is invaluable for racing.

3 The sprints

In this workout, you're aiming to improve your top-end speed. This not only raises the easy speed you can maintain but also helps you

switch off from thinking about technique, which can at times be overwhelming for newer swimmers. After a 300m easy warm-up, swim 10x25m as hard as you can. Take a long rest between each one – 45 seconds to a minute – so you're fully recovered and ready to give it your best. End with 200m of easy swimming.

4 The 'cheat' swim

Swimming a couple of kilometres at once probably seems out of reach at the moment, but by using pool toys you can go further than you think. Using a pullbuoy or fins, swim anything from 750m up to 2,000m at a steady pace, taking as few rests as you can. The extra buoyancy from the pullbuoy or propulsion from the fins should help you swim further, build your confidence and improve your tolerance for long periods in the pool. As time goes by you can start doing half-and-half sessions, where you swim the first half unaided and use your toys for the second half.

5 The 'race practice' swim

Get a couple of friends together to replicate the conditions of your chosen race. If it's a pool swim, set off at 10-second intervals and get used to passing each other in the lane, remembering to observe pool etiquette (if someone taps you on the feet, stop and wait for them to pass at the end of the lap). If your race is outdoors, ideally go to a lake and practise starting and swimming in a group. If you can't make it to an outdoor swim venue, you can still practise starting surrounded by others in the pool.



JAMES LAMPAID