



*"... the exclusive advantages of water make it the ideal place for people of all ages to exercise, particularly those with long-term health conditions."*

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## Swimming

Swimming. It is a hassle. You have to carve out time in your day, brave often-perishing changing rooms, and get your hair wet. So why is it that crowds are literally queueing up at dawn outside the local leisure centre to get their daily aquatic dose? Curious, I decided to take the plunge, and understand more about this popular sport.

Actually, it was injury that led me to swimming. A broken back and various joint ailments. Submerged in the water, your bones and muscles are somewhat unshackled from the constraints of gravity, making it ideal for those with musculoskeletal problems. It can be particularly therapeutic when returning to exercise from injury or illness. With the need to stay balanced in the water, swimming develops the deep stabilising muscles in the core and lower back. This not just improves posture, but it also makes it a valuable sport for those who suffer with back pain.

The buoyancy of the water can also be appealing to people who are overweight, when load-bearing activity can put great pressure on joints. But do not be fooled: your body is working hard in the pool. Water is denser than air, and the effort needed to overcome water resistance provides all-body toning. It strengthens the muscles, but that is not all! Swimming is unique in being one of the only sports to offer a blend of both cardiovascular and strength training. So, while you are achieving an all-body conditioning, the calories are burning (around 500 per hour)<sup>1</sup> and your cardiopulmonary capacity is being improved.

No doubt the physical benefits of swimming are easy to take a punt at, and I could certainly list dozens more. What I had not appreciated was the sociability. I had it down as a solitary sport, and it can be. But after several trips to the breakfast swim session, I had made new friends. In fact, it turns out that the leisure centre has a thriving community. Besides, recent evidence suggests that participation in swimming lessons can help children to develop cognitive and social skills quicker than those who do not have lessons.

There is the safety aspect, too. Drowning is the third highest cause of accidental death of children in the UK.<sup>2</sup> Yet an estimated one in three children leaving primary school cannot swim.<sup>3</sup>

And with all these rewards to boast, it will come as no surprise that a study by Swim England released in June 2017<sup>4</sup> evidences once and for all the health and wellbeing benefits of swimming. Swim England now plans to use these findings to raise awareness within the healthcare profession that swimming is a safe and cost-effective option to signpost patients to. It highlights that the exclusive advantages of water make it the ideal place for people of all ages to exercise, particularly those with long-term health conditions. At a time when service cuts signal less money for long-term care, this report uncovers that activities like swimming have the possibility of being a game-changer in supporting the health of the nation.

But swimming is so boring! And, in fact, it is for this reason that I continued. There is a peace in the water that is difficult to find elsewhere. You are alone with your thoughts, and your mind can wander. With no phone, no emails, and sounds muffled, it is a sensory detox. The pool is a gadget-free zone — there are surely not many places you can say that about now?

It is with some irony that I admit to spending quite some time aimlessly screen-staring and waiting for this article to write itself. The reality is that it was written in the pool.

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