

In the wet stuff

Primary Hazards associated with open water swimming.

This list is designed to give you information on primary hazards to consider before taking part in open water swimming, some advice on signs/symptoms and what to do. It is not a definitive list and other dangers can be experienced.

Cold water immersion- Cold shock can be experienced and may lead to a reflex response which includes gasping and an increase in heart rate, this will stabilise after a few minutes. This is the response you get when jumping into the cold sea on holiday or entering a cold shower. This is Ok if your head is above water and you can get out, if not the risk of drowning is high. This is why entry drills and controlled acclimatisation/entry are important skills to learn.

Hypothermia- Cold water (think below 25°C) will eventually cool your core. Once you reach 35°C you will be officially in an hypothermic state. Before this point you will experience all sorts of issues that ultimately result in swim failure. These are shivering, reduced grip and arm strength and coordination loss. Your swim angle will reduce (legs drop) and it will be more difficult to move forwards, your stroke rate will increase. Eventually the arms become stiff and claw like and you will be unable to swim. Once you notice the early signs or you just feel too cold that is the time to get out and get warm. Avoidance is the best policy, monitor your tolerance, reduce your swim time to match conditions including the air temperature and wind strength. Wear a wetsuit (unless you are engaged in non wetsuit sessions) and make sure it fits well. If you exit and feel very cold, warm up gradually, get your wet kit off, get into somewhere warm or at least out of the wind and layer up. Get a warm sweet drink. Body temperature can continue to fall for some time after you get out. Take a warm shower when you feel OK, keep it warm and not hot. Do not rub the skin.

Watercraft- If you swim in areas used by boats and other water users you need to be seen. Use a bright hat and a tow float. Arrange an escort. Swim in a designated area or swim somewhere else. Do not assume they will see you.

Water contamination- Water can contain all sorts of stuff that is potentially harmful. Swim in regularly tested areas and take precautions (read the information from Public Health England in relation to Weil's disease) observe good washing and hygiene practices. Avoid areas with algal blooms. If you become ill after swimming, even a few weeks after, tell your doctor. Avoid swimming after heavy rainfall for at least 24 hours in the sea or more in still water, especially in areas with risk of run-off. Many thousands of people swim in open water and suffer no problems so don't be too alarmed, most of the time the effects are minor. Be aware and follow advice. Check Environment agency website <https://environment.data.gov.uk/bwq/profiles/> click on your nearest beach and follow advice.

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Marine life- The coastal areas have a range of marine life that should be considered a hazard. These include marine mammals, weever fish and jelly fish. Stings are usually relatively minor and a wetsuit and goggles will afford protection. Weever fish are found in shallow water partially buried in sand and you may only find out when you stand on one, the sting is very painful. Wearing surf boots can limit exposure. Mammals (seals) should be avoided especially when in proximity to their young.

Entanglement- weeds, ropes, debris etc. Swim in areas that you know are safer or check the water and your route before swimming. If you can't see the bottom, don't jump in and assume debris may exist. If you swim into weeds relax and use slow movements to get through them, a wetsuit will give you more buoyancy so use it to float and keep your stroke shallow. Debris is more hazardous if the water is moving (rivers and sea) because you can become pinned.

No lifeguards- Most open water venues do not provide lifeguards. **Someone sitting in a kayak is not necessarily a lifeguard.** Make sure you are competent and understand the dangers. Do not swim alone. Keep parallel to the shore and have multiple exit points if possible. Learn about tides, rips and waves. Consider the weather and any upstream conditions if on a river. If you swim in the sea a lifeguarded beach is a safer option. Talk to the lifeguards if you plan to swim away from the patrolled area, they are there to help and advise and will appreciate you talking to them rather than just swimming off.