

Swimming & other Water-based Activities

A guide for people with heart conditions



ACPICR

Association of Chartered Physiotherapists
In Cardiovascular Rehabilitation

Many people enjoy swimming and other water-based activities. They can be good for improving health and fitness and are a fun way to keep active. They are particularly good if you have joint and muscle problems or peripheral vascular disease.

What are the specific benefits?

- Improve and maintain muscle tone, strength and endurance
- Improve coordination and balance
- Improve core stability
- Improve confidence, well-being and quality of life
- Improve and maintains joint suppleness
- Helps to maintain a healthy body weight and shape
- Water-based activities are both sociable and fun.



When could I start?

When you have a heart condition there are some important things to consider before you participate in water-based activities. The reason for this is that both swimming and aqua-aerobics can be strenuous activities and being in the water may cause you to underestimate how hard you are working.



How can I get started?

It is recommended you have an assessment with a cardiac rehabilitation (CR) exercise professional who will provide advice and guidance. Starting will vary on your own circumstances and specific cardiac condition.

If you have had open-heart surgery

- You should wait at least twelve weeks before swimming to ensure good healing of the breast bone

If you have a pacemaker or implantable cardioverter device (ICD)

- If your device has recently been put in you should wait until the wound has healed. Dependent on the device you may need to wait six weeks to allow the leads to settle .
- The swimming stroke advised will be dependent on your individual device. Breaststroke is suitable for all devices. Front crawl, backstroke and butterfly can potentially damage leads due to repeated strain on them
- With an ICD it is advisable to always have someone with you or be in a lifeguard supervised pool

Jacuzzis, steam rooms and saunas can affect your blood pressure. When first using them do so only for a couple of minutes. Increase the time gradually up to a maximum of 10 minutes. If you have any symptoms e.g. dizziness or palpitations then these environments are probably not suitable for you. Remember to drink plenty of water and never use the cold plunge or cold shower before or afterwards

Stop exercising if you experience any chest pain, palpitations, dizziness or light-headedness. If the symptoms do not go away promptly with rest and/or GTN spray/tablets seek medical advice as soon as possible.

What about warm up and cool down?

This is just as important when exercising in water as it is when exercising out of water

- Enter and exit at the shallow end to get used to the temperature and depth
- Walk up and down the width of the shallow end
- When swimming start and finish at a slower pace
- When you get out of the water it is important to carry on moving gently for a few minutes afterwards to give your body time to recover.



How should I feel during my session?

- Due to the buoyancy and temperature of the water it is very easy to underestimate how hard your body is working
- You may not feel warmer, sweaty etc as you do when exercising on land. So it can be easy to misjudge your exertion.
- It is a good idea to exercise at a lower level than you would do out of the water
- You should always feel comfortable and able to continue easily with the activity.



Other things to consider

- Allow one to two hours after a meal before exercising
- Avoid exercise if you are feeling unwell
- Work at your own pace
- Choose the swimming stroke that is most comfortable and familiar to you unless advised otherwise
- Avoid holding your breath and swimming underwater
- Diving, jumping and putting your face in the water may not be recommended
- Avoid extremes of water temperature, between 26°C and 33°C are best for your heart
- Most public swimming pools are regulated at 29°C which is ideal
- Speak to an aqua instructor if you have any concerns

Scuba diving requires a specific health check - for up to date advice please visit; UK Sports Diving Medical Committee.

[Medical Conditions - UKDMC](#)

[Safe diving guide - British Sub-Aqua Club \(bsac.com\)](#)

Open water swimming

Consider other factors which might increase your effort e.g. water currents and wave size. You may need to build up your time in the water slowly to help acclimatise to the cold water.

<https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/>

Stop exercising if you experience any chest discomfort, palpitations, dizziness or light-headedness. If the symptoms do not go away promptly with rest and/ or your GTN spray/tablets, seek medical advice as soon as possible.

This guidance is based on available evidence and expert opinion.

Produced by the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Cardiovascular Rehabilitation

This leaflet is not intended to replace the advice that your doctor or cardiovascular rehabilitation team give you based on their expert knowledge of your condition.

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