



# COVID-19 GUIDANCE TO OPEN WATER SWIMMERS

(Version 7: Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2020)

IN ASSOCIATION WITH



## SH<sub>2</sub>OUT INTRODUCTION

SH<sub>2</sub>OUT is a partnership between British Triathlon, Swim England and RLSS UK which has been developed to promote and progress open water swimming and safety within the sport.

The partnership aims to provide appropriate resources and to support the development of standards that ensure safe and compelling experiences for open water swimming participants.

This guidance has been developed through the collaboration and input of all three organisations and in association with Triathlon Scotland, Scottish Swimming, Swim Wales and Welsh Triathlon. The aim is to give swimmers guidance on how to approach open water swimming in the current climate.

## OPENING STATEMENT

This document is based on the latest government instruction across England, Scotland, and Wales regarding Coronavirus/COVID-19 and is designed to offer guidance to open water swimmers in all British territories. The Scottish sections have been updated to respond to the changing instructions in Phase 2 of the Scottish Government's route map and are in line with the public health advice found here: [Scottish Government: Coronavirus in Scotland](#)

### ENGLAND

The guidance is based on Step One of the government's document; Our Plan to Rebuild: The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy. From 1 June 2020, this enables people in England to exercise freely outdoors, travel to exercise, exercise with up to six other people from different households and visit outdoor venues operating social distancing regimes at all times.

### SCOTLAND

1. The guidance is based on the government's route map through and out of the crisis. From 22 June 2020, you may exercise freely outdoors more than once per day, so long as you maintain social distancing whilst doing it. You can exercise only with people from your own or two other households per day up to a maximum of 8 people. Travel distance restrictions are relaxed from 3rd July however localised restrictions may apply. General travel guidance outlined by the Scottish Government should always be adhered to. Guidance is available at [Staying Safe and Protecting Others: Travel](#)

### WALES

The guidance is based on the Welsh Government's 'Leading Wales out of the pandemic: A Framework for Recovery' and 'Unlocking our Society and Economy: Continuing the Conversation'. From 1 June 2020, you may exercise freely outdoors with no limit, so long as you stay local and maintain social distancing. You can exercise with people from your household and meet members of one other household whilst staying local and outdoors.

## SWIMMERS GUIDANCE

When open water swimming is permitted by your government, you should ask yourself whether you think it is a socially responsible thing for you to do; due to the inherent dangers, increased risk and pressure that this may cause the NHS and emergency services. Certainly, if you are new to open water swimming, we don't advise that you go open water swimming outside of an operated and supervised venue which has a safety crew (many of these are not open currently).

ENGLAND 

Open water swimming is permitted, and venues are beginning to open. You may swim with up to six other people from different households, if social distancing is maintained. Coaches may now work on a 1:5 ratio with others. Coaches should only coach within the limits of their knowledge and specifically, what they are qualified to deliver, ensuring compliance with social distancing rules and following good hygiene at all times. This includes regular hand washing for at least 20 seconds and avoiding contact with shared hard surfaces, such as equipment used by others in your sessions. Please find hygiene guidance from Public Health England [here](#).

SCOTLAND 

Scotland is currently in Phase 2 of the Scottish Government's route map out of lockdown and open water swimming is now permitted and venues are beginning to open. You may swim with your own or two other households per day (maximum 8 people) if social distancing of at least 2m is maintained. One-to-one personal training or coaching is permitted if it is outdoors and physical distancing can be maintained. This can be with people from two other households at one time and in a single day (i.e. a coach cannot coach people from more than two different households in a single day, even if coached separately). Good hygiene practices must also be followed. This includes regular hand washing for at least 20 seconds and avoiding contact with shared hard surfaces, such as equipment used by others in your sessions. Remember, car sharing with another household is still not permitted and many rural car parks and associated facilities remain closed. Where possible cycling or walking to the location is encouraged, otherwise park responsibly and sensibly in accordance with the Highway Code and with respect to other road users. Please find hygiene guidance from Health Protection Scotland [here](#), and [here](#).

WALES 

Open water swimming is permitted, and venues are beginning to open. You may swim with your own or one other household if it is local (within 5 miles) and social distancing is maintained. The guidance on gathering states that while you can now exercise with people from one other household, group activities are still not allowed. Coaches should not deliver training to more than one household at any one time. This includes coaching, working on a 1:1 ratio if you are qualified to do so, whilst complying with social distancing rules and following good hygiene. This includes regular hand washing for at least 20 seconds and avoiding contact with shared hard surfaces, such as equipment used by others in your sessions. Face-to-face coaching should only be delivered in your local area, approximately within a five-mile radius of your home.

Open water can include rivers, lakes, natural pools, [lochs](#) and the sea. There is a big difference between swimming in a pool and swimming outdoors and there is an even higher risk of drowning when swimming in the sea.

If you do decide to go open water swimming, we recommend the following:

- Never swim alone.
- Adhere to social distancing requirements throughout your swim, including arrival, changing and post swim.
- Let someone in your household know where you are, what you are doing and expected time to return.
- It is your responsibility that you are sufficiently fit and healthy to participate in open water swimming. You should think about any pre-existing medical conditions that you may have and if you are in any doubt, we recommend that you do not swim.
- In terms of sea swimming, [RNLI lifeguards are not yet back to full operation on beaches](#). Volunteer lifeboat crews are fully operational but those partaking in sea swimming must understand the risks and take the necessary steps to keep themselves safe. This will help reduce

the demand on lifeboat crews and other emergency services. Continue to look to the RNLI advice for sea swimming - <https://rnli.org/>

- Follow all the guidance outlined below.

## Pre-Swimming

### Should you swim?

As mentioned above, it is your responsibility that you are sufficiently fit and healthy to participate in open water swimming. You should think about any pre-existing medical conditions that you may have and if you are in any doubt, we recommend that you do not swim. It is yet unclear what impact Covid-19 will have on the long-term health of those who contracted the virus. As a precaution, you should consider the following:

- If you were hospitalised due to Covid-19, you should undergo a form of health screening prior to taking part in open water swimming. This screening is best led by a doctor with specialist training in sports medicine. However other doctors may feel competent to make decisions on your fitness to compete and to decide any appropriate investigations that might be required.
- If you were not hospitalised due to Covid-19, but self-isolated having shown symptoms at any time, you are also recommended to undergo a form of screening.
- If you have felt entirely well during the pandemic, you are not routinely recommended to undergo health screening, but it is something to be considered as part of your normal health monitoring for the health-conscious competitor.
- People who are symptomatic should self-isolate for 7 days: household members for 14 days as per info on NHS guidance. No one who is self-isolating should attend an outdoor sports facility/ activity

Your GP should be able to guide you on what level of screening you may require, and who is the best person to assist you in the process. Again, if you are in any doubt about your health, you should not swim.

### SCOTLAND

**IMPORTANT:** Do not leave your home to undertake exercise or outdoor activity if Scottish Government advice means you should stay at home because you or someone you live with has or has had symptoms of COVID-19.

### Where to swim?

We recommend that you swim in an operated and supervised open water venue.

### ENGLAND WALES

You can find a list of accredited SH<sub>2</sub>OUT venues [here](#). A SH<sub>2</sub>OUT accredited venue is one that has had its documentation, procedures, water safety provision and operations approved by SH<sub>2</sub>OUT in 2019.

You can find some other open water venues [here](#). Please note that SH<sub>2</sub>OUT don't endorse or promote swimming at these venues, and cannot guarantee the level of safety at these venues.

It is advised to contact the venue that you plan to swim at prior to arrival to ensure that the venue is open and operating swimming. Some venues will require a pre-booking prior to swimming to enable them to maintain social distancing at their venue and whilst swimming. We are providing guidance and support to venues to operate whilst implementing COVID-19 advice.

## SCOTLAND

We recognise that Scotland does not have any SH<sub>2</sub>OUT accredited venues. As a result, we understand that swimmers may access the sea, lochs, or reservoirs. If you choose to swim in open water in Scotland, you should stay local broadly within 5 miles of your home), stay away from outdoor “honey pots” and follow the below guidance. Many rural car parks and associated facilities remain closed at this time.

ALL

If you decide to swim in open water that is not operated or supervised, then you should carefully plan the location based on the following:

- Check out local knowledge and advice (speak to clubs or other swimmers).
- Make sure you have permission to swim at your chosen spot if **required**.
- Look out for safety signs and online information/feedback.
- Avoid weirs, locks and other structures.
- If a sign says “no swimming” and/or “danger” don’t swim there.
- Think about the water quality - is the water potentially polluted (e.g. looks dirty, is a strange colour or smells) or does it have any pipes running into it. Don’t swim in stagnant water.
- Think about water temperature and the weather, as outlined below.
- Be aware of tides and currents. A strong current can easily prevent you reaching where you want to swim, or it could pull you away from your planned exit point.

## Equipment

ENGLAND  WALES 

For all open water swimming below 20 degrees, the wearing of a full body wetsuit is recommended. Wetsuits provide insulation against the cold, improving cold water tolerance and extending the time a swimmer can remain (comfortably) in the water. They also increase buoyancy so that, even when static, swimmers float. These two qualities can help build confidence in swimmers but only if the wetsuit fits well.

## SCOTLAND

Scottish Swimming recommendations are that wetsuits are recommended to 18C and depending on air temperature and swimmer experience when the water temperature is between 18-20C wetsuit use needs to be assessed.

ALL

Poorly fitting wetsuits are a common source of stress and anxiety, particularly for swimmers who are new to open water swimming. If wetsuits are too tight, they can restrict movement and breathing to a point where the swimmer may unzip the suit for relief, causing it to flood with water. If they are not tight enough, they will also flood with water. In both these cases drag is increased making swimming far more difficult as well as compromising the insulating properties of the wetsuit.

The main things to check when you put on your wetsuit are:

- That the wetsuit fits snugly - particularly around the neck where a good seal helps prevent excess water entering the suit.

- There is a comfortable fit from crotch to shoulder so that arm reach and flexibility are not restricted.
- There is correct length in the arms and legs without excess material being gathered up that will increase drag.
- The wetsuit is not being worn back to front.

We also recommend the use of a tow float. A tow float is a brightly coloured, inflatable bag that is attached to the swimmer via a line/waistband. The benefits of a tow float include:

- Increased visibility of the swimmer
- It can make it easier to identify you - making recovery easier.

Goggles are recommended as they allow you to see underwater obstructions.

A brightly coloured swim cap again can help with being seen, which can be important if there are boats passing by.

Ensure you take a towel, warm clothes (including hat and gloves) and a hot drink for after your swim. See the post-swim section below.

When open water swimming, cover cuts and abrasions, however minor, with sticking plasters. Don't swim if you have deep cuts or open wounds as the infection risk is higher, including the risk of contracting Weil's disease.

## Weather Conditions and Water Temperature

Different types of weather can lead to additional risks that you need to be aware of. In hot weather, there can be a significant difference between the air and water temperature - see Swim Entry guidance. Strong winds can also make swimming conditions difficult, as water can become unsettled and wavy and add wind chill, so you may get colder than you expect. You should never swim if there is any danger of an electrical storm. We advise only swimming when the weather is suitable and calm.

Both high and low water temperatures can put significant stress on swimmers putting your health at risk. SH<sub>2</sub>OUT recommends that all open water swimming should take place in water at 11 degrees or above. At temperatures lower than this we do not recommend open water swimming. The reason for this is swimmers can experience a cold-water shock response when entering water, this can also happen above 11 degrees.

You can mitigate the risks posed by water temperature and weather conditions by acclimatisation - please see Equipment and Swim Entry below.

## Whilst swimming

### Entry and Exit

Planning your entry to and exit out of the water prior to swimming is vital. You need to be able to enter the water slowly in a safe way that allows you to acclimatise to the water temperature - do not jump in. You need to be able to give yourself the opportunity to get used to the water temperature and regulate your breathing close to your water entry point in case you panic and need to exit. You also need to ensure you can find clear water and keep 2 metres apart from the person you are swimming with at all times.

When open water swimming, the colder the water and air temperature, the quicker you will cool down and the colder it is the less time you should spend in the water.

It is important to consider underfoot conditions leading to your entry point - to avoid risks of cuts and grazes. Try to wear shoes as close as possible to the water's edge and look out for sharp stones or broken glass.

To acclimatise we recommend that you:

- Immerse yourself slowly
- Put your face in the water
- Take some deep breaths
  
- Gently tread water slowly moving your legs and arms
- If you become nervous or uncomfortable, it is recommended that you roll on to your back and float and breath deeply until you regain control. Your wetsuit and your tow float will help keep you buoyant.

Prior to entering the water for the first time you should plan your exit point etc. You should ensure you can easily exit the water prior to entry and make sure you have access to your towel and warm clothing quickly upon exiting the water. Remember to take into account currents and tides.

## Swim Course

When planning your entry and exit point, you also need to plan your swim course/route. Take into consideration:

- How long you plan to swim for (limit your time in the water if the temperature is close to 11 degrees - stop before you get cold).
- Your experience as an open water swimmer - you will fatigue, and this can affect your ability to hold your swim stroke technique. You may also cramp, if this happens roll onto your back. This will help you float, then relax and wait until you recover.
- Your cold water acclimatisation/previous experience of swimming in cold water  
Your health and whether you have any pre-existing conditions that may affect your ability to cope with the open water swimming environment.
- You need to be able to maintain a distance of 2 metres from the person you are swimming with (unless from your own household). Think about how this may be affected by other water users - boats and other swimmers. If you have any hesitation about being able to maintain the social distancing rules at any point during your swim, you should not proceed.
- Where possible swim along the shoreline and as close to the bank as safe to do so.
- If you get into difficulty in the water, don't panic, stay calm and float on to your back until you can control your breathing and then continue to swim once again.

## Post Swim

### Recovery - re-heat plan and nutrition

Once you have finished swimming and exited the water, you need to dry off and dress immediately. It is advisable to put on warm clothes, including a hat and gloves. This is to reduce the risk of you suffering from the "after drop", which is the lowering of your core temperature.

In warm weather, if you are feeling hot, you may need to sit in the shallows (if possible) before exiting to help reduce your body temperature.

If possible, it is advised to get into a sheltered spot - so you are protected from any wind or chill. This could be your car. Again, ensure you maintain social distancing when you have exited the water. To limit contact with other swimmers and surfaces, it is our current recommendation to prepare to leave site as soon as you have completed your swim.

It is also advisable to have a hot drink as soon as possible after swimming as this will help to maintain body temperature. You may also be low on energy so refuel with something sugary too. Before you eat or drink, wash hands using sterilizing wipes or gels.



## **Cleaning Yourself and Equipment**

Do not share any equipment with another person outwith your household.

When you return home shower in fresh water in the earliest opportunity and again put on lots of warm clothes. This will remove all microbes, many of which are able to survive on the skin surface for long periods.

Rinse and wash all your kit in fresh water before drying thoroughly - including wetsuit, goggles, tow float and swimming costume.

If you feel ill seek medical advice by calling 111 - including rashes for up to three weeks following your swim. Highlight that you have been swimming in open water and tell the operator the location that you swam in.

## **Leave it as you found it**

Many of the places that you may open water swim in are beautiful locations and we want to keep them that way. Ensure you take all your belongings and leave the location as you found it. Take any litter with you and dispose when back at home.

