

Open Water Swim Tips For Newbies (and Not-So-Newbies, Too)

by Dr. Daniel Shaye, Chiropractic Physician



“Open” water (OW) refers to bodies of water like lakes, rivers, and oceans that are not “Closed” in by walls and/or lane lines. If you’re comfortable and confident in the “think tank” (pool), you might be tempted to try open water. Before you take the plunge, here a few tips to help you have a safe, effective, and enjoyable experience.

Tip #1: It’s not a pool. You won’t be able to hang on a lane line or swim 30 seconds to guaranteed safety; and you typically won’t have a trained lifeguard watching over you. Only people who can swim, unassisted by flotation devices, should consider open water swimming. I’d suggest that a would-be OW swimmer be able to swim 5 minutes in a pool, never touching the bottom or side, as a bare-bones minimum test. Swimming with a friend, or having kayak support or a friend walking the beach or riverbank, is also advised.

Tip #2: Every day is different. A calm body of water can be unrecognizably rough and choppy on another day. One day the current is carrying you this way, and another day (or even later the same day) the current is flowing the other direction. Be mentally flexible, and assume nothing.

Tip #3: Every season is different. Local rivers and lakes typically hit 90 degrees in Summer. Hydrate well, listen to your body, and curtail your distance or intensity before you overheat and get in trouble. In Winter, cold water can cause a gasp reflex, causing water inhalation that is at best unpleasant (don’t ask about the worst possibilities). Splash cold water on your face in preparation, and/or literally scream into the water as you dive in (people never inhale while screaming). Consider taking your temperature before and after swims — body temperature under 95 Fahrenheit is considered hypothermia. I’ll write a future article on cold water swimming, but for now just be aware that confusion and cardiac events are risks.

Tip #4: Accept that you’re in the critters’ world. Don’t kid yourself that you’re the only creature in the water. Be aware of what creatures may pose hazards, and make suitable decisions. For example, the middle and upper James River has zero jellyfish; but the York is famous for them. The ocean has sharks (though your risk of a harmful encounter is extremely low), and fish abound in both fresh and salt water. Your main risk in most open waters, from a wildlife perspective, is panic due to real or perceived contact. This isn’t Florida, where your choice of swimming hole is a life-or-death decision. Be aware, but tame your imagination.

Tip #5: Panic is a killer. A person who could easily swim 4 minutes to land can get in trouble if they panic. If you’re a

newbie who might panic, do it in shallow waters where you can just stand up, rather than in deeper waters that could get you and/or a potential rescuer in serious trouble. Gradually increase exposure to what you fear, overcoming it in steps.

Tip #6: Fear the shallows. Diving into shallow waters, especially if murky waters conceal hazards, is dangerous. I seek out waters where I’m less likely to bump into or get cut by what’s on the bottom. Shallow water allows you to stand up if you get tired or in trouble, but getting cut or banging into a barnacle-covered piece of wood or concrete is never fun.

Tip #7: Keep your head down. Without lane lines, you need to “sight” where you’re going. Newbie OW swimmers swim head-up, constantly checking if they’re on course. The problem is that head-up means the feet sink, causing drag. If you don’t care about speed or efficiency, you still want to learn to swim head-down as your neck and shoulders will complain if you consistently over-sight. Learn to spot stationary objects (especially those on shore, if that’s an option) and sight on them on every 3rd, or 5th, or 20th stroke depending on the course and your needs.

Tip #8: Learn to bilaterally breathe. If you are a GREAT pool swimmer, but only breathe on one side, you’ll be fine in open water — right? Not if the waves are smashing you in the face on your preferred-breathing side. It’s handy to be able to breathe on both sides if water conditions make one side intolerable, or if a random waves steals a breath opportunity.

Tip #9: Beware 2-legged critters and their watercraft. Boats, jet-skis, even kite-surfers and windsurfers all pose hazards to the OW swimmer. Wear a bright-colored cap or tow an easily-spotted inflatable safety pod. Above all, be aware. Your bright swim cap won’t do you much good if a jet-skier with a beer or three in him never thinks to look for you.

Tip #10: Have fun! Swimming open water is amazing. You can enjoy a pack in ways that aren’t possible in the pool. You can enjoy leaping fish, or eagles striking the water in search of dinner, or the plink-plink-plink of rain. Soak up the experience.

Yours in health, fitness, and wellness,

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Daniel Shaye'.

-Dr. Daniel A. Shaye
Certified Chiropractic Sports Physician
Fellow, International Academy of Medical Acupuncture

Do you have a health-related question you’d like answered? A topic you’d like explored? Mail your questions c/o Performance Chiropractic, 1307 Jamestown Road, Ste. 103, Williamsburg, VA 23185; e-mail pchiro@performancechiropractic.com; visit us on FaceBook at [facebook.com/performancechiro](https://www.facebook.com/performancechiro); or go to performancechiropractic.com