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6 health benefits of swimming

It's thought that around 14 million people go swimming yearly in England. Indoor swimming continues to be a popular sport with open water swimming on the rise, children typically attend swimming lessons with their schools, and that's not counting the Brits who swim abroad while on holiday. While swimming can be fun, did you know it's actually improving your health at the same time?

What are the benefits of swimming?

Dr Deborah Lee of [Dr Fox Online Pharmacy](#) explains the benefits of swimming and how it's a fantastic form of aerobic exercise that works various areas of the body.

"Aerobic exercise involves using large muscle groups. It stresses the cardiorespiratory system (heart and lungs) to provide sufficient oxygen to exercising muscles. Taking part in regular aerobic exercise has been shown to be protective against the development of [heart disease](#), [diabetes](#), and [cancer](#)."

A gentle form of exercise that works various body parts

Running miles on a treadmill isn't everyone's preferred form of exercise, so swimming might be for you if you prefer something that is slower-paced and gentler, but still beneficial. For this reason, swimming is a great exercise for when we get older and adopt a more sedentary lifestyle.

Helps to build muscle

"Swimming involves pushing against water resistance which, in turn, aids with muscular strength at the same time as exercising the heart and lungs. By doing this, you will be increasing your 'maximal oxygen uptake' - the efficiency of your body in getting oxygen to exercising muscles," says Dr Lee.

Another benefit of swimming is that it can also improve your [physical fitness](#) by increasing your endurance and stamina levels, helping you to maintain a healthy weight, toning your muscles, and increasing strength. Since it works your entire body - from your fingertips down to your toes - swimming is a great all-over exercise¹.

Aids with weight loss

Regular swimming can decrease your body fat levels. Dr Lee explains that swimming uses up more calories than many land-based exercises, such as running.

"The exact amount of calories you will burn depends on your weight but, for example, someone weighing 155 pounds (around 11 stone) will roughly use up between 493 and 704 calories per hour while swimming. If you tend to sweat heavily when exercising, swimming is good as it helps keep you cool."

She adds: "Regular swimming has been shown to reduce visceral fat (abdominal fat) which is dangerous, metabolically active fat. Visceral fat secretes hormones that cause chronic inflammation, a biochemical process that underpins the development of many of the chronic diseases we see today. Reducing the amount of visceral fat is key for good health."

Swimming can also result in favourable changes to your blood lipids ([cholesterol](#)).

Additionally, swimming is a good exercise if you've gone a long time without working out and want to ease yourself back into exercise. Swimming can ease your risk of cardiovascular disease, [hypertension](#), [type-2 diabetes](#), and [dementia](#) too.

Boosts mental health

Swimming regularly can greatly [improve your mental health](#). The exercise helps to combat stress and reduce levels of [anxiety](#) and [depression](#) by raising levels of endorphins (the brain's natural painkillers). This is why you'll often feel calmer and more relaxed post-swim.

In one study conducted by YouGov, 492,000 adults with mental health conditions said they had reduced their number of visits to a medical professional for their mental health as a result of swimming once every 2-3 weeks. Commissioned by Swim England, the poll also found that 490,000 people reduced, or no longer take, medication for mental health because of swimming².

In fact, just immersing yourself in the water can increase blood flow to the brain, not only boosting your mood but also improving memory, concentration, and general cognitive function. Not to mention that swimming can be a social activity that you can do with friends, reducing loneliness and increasing general motivation in life.

Research also suggests that swimming can reverse brain damage from stress by creating new neurons (a process called hippocampal neurogenesis).

Improves sleep

It has long been hypothesised that physical activity like swimming can aid with sleep and improve disorders such as insomnia. And it certainly seems to be a nice way to wind down at the end of the day, given that it doesn't need to be a strenuous activity, you can move at your own pace and it's done in a calm environment.

"Swimming is a great option for improving your sleep. Moderate-intensity exercise has been shown to improve the quality and duration of sleep," says Dr Lee.

Plus, some people just enjoy the sounds of the water. If you're swimming in a private pool or when your local swimming baths are quiet in the evening, the splashing of the water can be soothing and help you decompress.

Relieves pressure on joints

Going swimming isn't going to [strain your joints](#) in the same way that weightlifting would.

Dr Lee explains: "When you swim, the water supports the body weight, which relieves pressure on joints. Those with osteoarthritis, or other inflammatory conditions affecting the joints, will find swimming is especially beneficial."

For this reason, swimming is a healthy exercise through middle-to-older age, as it's safe but also offers a wide range of benefits that you might not get from something more physically taxing.

For example, one study of adult women compared the effects of swimming versus walking. The findings indicated that, in the short term, swimming reduced body weight. In the long term, swimming improved body weight and improved body fat distribution in comparison with walking³.

Who might benefit most from swimming?

"Swimming is a good way of strengthening your core muscles – chest, back, abdominal and pelvic muscles. It can help tone the [pelvic floor](#). Therefore, swimming can help people with back pain, disc problems, and arthritis, and be a good form of physiotherapy after surgery, including joint replacements. A strong core helps with balance and stamina, can help keep someone mobile, and can help prevent falls.

"Ageing is also linked to loss of muscle, but swimming can help to build this back up. Many people even in middle age have sarcopenia – a relative loss of muscle strength," Dr Lee adds.

Swimming has also been found to be beneficial for those with neurodegenerative conditions, such as multiple sclerosis, or after a spinal injury. It's also recommended for those who are pregnant, people with mental health conditions, and those with Alzheimer's disease³.

Dr Lee explains that the benefit of swimming is for just about everyone of all ages and abilities, provided it is done safely, and you seek advice before venturing into the pool if you have concerns or have recently been diagnosed with a severe health condition.

Further reading

1. [A comparison of the effects of swimming and walking on body weight.](#)
2. [Study says swimming helps mental health.](#)
3. [Key swimming statistics and findings.](#)

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Last updated by: Emily Jane Bashforth 31/08/2022	
Peer reviewed by: Dr Krishna Vakharia, MRCP 31/08/2022	

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