

Different Strokes

Swimming won't just make you more fit, it'll keep injuries at bay.
Everybody into the pool!

by: **Bob Cooper**

In the last sweaty miles of a hot summertime run, nothing seems more inviting than a dip in a cold pool, lake, or ocean. But does swimming offer anything besides a way to cool your heels? Absolutely, according to Anne Wilson, a former collegiate swimmer who coaches Phoenix-area triathletes. Swimming is a great workout for runners because it builds strength in often-neglected muscles and promotes recovery. "Swimming enhances functional strength in the upper body and core muscles," says Wilson. This is the kind of strength you need to maintain an upright running form at the end of races and hard workouts, when runners have a tendency to hunch forward.

And runners who swim regularly may recover from their road miles faster than landlubbers do. "Swimming gives you 'active recovery,' free of the impact forces of running," says Wilson. "The hydrostatic pressure and coolness of water promote blood flow, which carries waste products away from sore muscles."

Any pool workout can be done in the open water of a lake, bay, or ocean. But just as hilly trails are slower and harder to run than flat roads, so is swimming in the "uneven terrain" of waves and currents. "Open water poses a set of challenges that pools don't, like current, cold water temperatures, and even marine life," says Bill Floyd, a USA Triathlon certified coach in Florida whose athletes often swim in Tampa Bay and occasionally have to deal with shark sightings. Consequently, you'll work out harder--and burn more calories--when swimming in open water than you will in a pool. Cold water can also bring on hypothermia, so wear a wet suit and a thick swim cap if the water temperature is below 74

degrees. Other safety precautions include swimming with a buddy and swimming close (parallel) to shore.

Whether you're in a pool or in the Pacific, swimming is a technique sport like golf or skiing. So unless you're a natural in the water, you'll get the most out of your swimming workouts if you take lessons to learn how to stroke, kick, and breathe properly. "The most common beginner's mistake is to swim with the head tilted up, which causes the legs to sink," says Wilson. "That's called 'swimming uphill,' and it will have you gasping after a few minutes, even if you're really fit. Always look straight down except when you're rolling your head sideways to breathe." An adult swim class is the best place to learn the basics of proper swimming technique.

Treading in Water

Lap swimming isn't the only way to increase your fitness in the water. In fact, aqua-running is probably the best of all cross-training options for runners because of the direct impact it can have on your running performance. "Done right, it's a full-body workout involving the legs, arms, shoulders, and core muscles," says Doug Stern, a deep-water-running instructor for the New York Road Runners since 1990. That's because, according to Stern, water is 773 times more resistant than air, so it serves to strengthen all key running muscles, thus increasing your land-running turnover and stride length. Also, water exercise is isokinetic--the water resists you only as much as you resist it--so you can work out as hard or as easy as you like. Studies have shown that runners who aqua-run improve their hip extension and even run faster 5-K times. Aqua-runners can also maintain aerobic fitness for up to six weeks when not running on land--making it a great injury-recovery activity.

If you've tried running in a pool only to end up thrashing around

like a cat in a bathtub, next time use a flotation device. Most aqua belts and aqua vests cost \$20 to \$30, but other flotation devices work well, too. "You can get by with almost anything that keeps you afloat," says Stern, "like foam 'noodles' or an inflatable 'doughnut,' which you'll find at most pools."

As with swimming, says Stern, aqua-running is all about technique. Once in the deep end of a pool or calm lake, with only your head out of water, don't try to run with the same motions you use on solid ground. "Run with a sweeping, pendulum-like motion from hips to toes, with your knees hardly bending at all," he says. "Turn your toes slightly downward like a ballet dancer's. The arms should be straightened just like your legs, with very little elbow bend, and swinging close to your sides so that your thumbs graze your thighs. Each 'stride' should be short, with the arms and legs staying within the five o'clock to seven o'clock positions."

Your head, chest, and hips should be upright and aligned, just as they would be if you were running on land, although you shouldn't be going anywhere. If you do travel around in the pool, you're probably leaning too far forward. And don't expect to move your legs as quickly as you can on land--remember the 773-times greater resistance? Aqua-running is definitely hard work. But it'll help make your next road run even better.

*The Aquatic Center at the Rose Bowl has aqua jogging belts available to use, the pool use fee for the day is \$10.