



Swimming For Fitness

BY SUE DE PASQUALE

Would you like to find a single activity that can improve your aerobic fitness, boost your body strength, increase your flexibility and tone your muscles? Look no farther than your local swimming pool. Considered the perfect form of exercise by many fitness experts, swimming is truly a lifetime activity—something you can pursue well into your 80s or 90s—that almost completely avoids wear and tear on muscles and joints.

“The feel of the water, the weightlessness; it’s so relaxing to be in such a different environment, with such buoyancy,” says Annie Lawler, veteran swimming instructor at the North Baltimore Swim School at Meadowbrook, the facility where six-time Olympic gold medalist Michael Phelps trained.

While there are plenty of older folks who rely on water activities to relieve their arthritis, Lawler also sees her

share of middle-aged and younger athletes—competitive runners, cyclists, tennis players—who head to the pool on the advice of their doctors.

Gail Owen, for example, was an avid tennis and squash player well into her 30s, until, she says laughingly, “my body parts started wearing out.” After surgeries on her foot and knee, she turned to swimming to stay fit. “Swimming keeps the body toned but it doesn’t hurt you. I love everything about it,” she says. Now 60, Owen swims three times a week at Meadowbrook. “It refreshes me and keeps me relaxed,” she says. “I try to enjoy each swim and I usually do.”

Before starting your own fitness program, Lawler suggests signing up for a stroke clinic or swim class for a refresher in technique. “We now know how to swim with a lot more ease than in the old days,” she says. If classes aren’t

your thing, there are plenty of good books out there. Lawler’s personal favorite: *Fitness Swimming* (Human Kinetics Publishers, 1998) by Emmett Hines. (To find swimming facilities in your area, visit the Web site of United States Masters Swimming, a national organization that promotes swimming for fitness and competition, at www.usms.org.)

Proper breathing is the biggest challenge for many novice swimmers. That’s because the process (inhale through the mouth; exhale through the nose) is the opposite of what runners and other “land” athletes are used to doing, Lawler says. Being relaxed is key. The looser you are, the more air you can take in with each breath.

Once you’re ready to take the plunge, Lawler offers these tips:

- Aim to swim at least three times a week, starting with 30-minute workouts and building up to 45 minutes or an hour. (Be sure to bring a water bottle to the poolside—staying hydrated is vital!)
- Don’t get discouraged! The goal is to increase distance and decrease rest time over a period of weeks. Start by resting for 30 seconds or a minute between each lap, then reduce the rest to 15 seconds, then five seconds, until you are swimming continuously.
- Mix it up! Doing a variety of strokes at different speeds will keep your workout interesting, help prevent injury and ensure you work different muscle sets. (The breaststroke works the inner and outer thigh, for instance, while the butterfly is great for the abs.) Water aids such as kickboards and fins (which strengthen and tone leg muscles) can also be a great addition to your workout.

What you'll need to get started

The "supply" list for swimming is refreshingly simple.

- **Be social:** Enjoy meeting up with your fellow swimmers in the locker room and chatting at the end of the lap lane. And augment lap swimming with a class in aqua running or water aerobics. Having your head out of the water allows you more time for camaraderie.
- **Warm up/warm down:** Just as with other activities, you should start your workout at a warm-up pace, move into your main set, then cool down before finishing. While some prefer to loosen up with a soak in the hot tub before swimming, others make it their last stop before hitting the showers.

WATER BOTTLE: Though surrounded by water, you still sweat when you swim, and blow off water vapor as you breathe. Keep a supply of water at poolside and drink regularly (before you get thirsty) throughout your workout.

SWIMSUIT: A snug fit is key when choosing a "competitive" swimsuit — the kind usually made of Lycra and meant for swimming laps rather than lounging beachside. Many suits will stretch a full size after just a few swimming sessions, and that means added fabric flapping around and slowing you down. Annie Lawler, veteran swimming instructor at the North Baltimore Swim

School at Meadowbrook, advises men to "summon up the courage" to wear a pair of form-fitting racing briefs. "Trunks are nothing but drag," she notes.

GOGGLES: Key to protecting your eyes from the sting of prolonged exposure to chlorine, these come in different shapes equipped with different gaskets (the soft material around the eyecup). To find the style that best fits the contours of your face, try on a variety.

CAP: Vital for keeping hair out of your eyes, nose and mouth, a swim cap also helps minimize water resistance.



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