



OPEN WATER SWIMMING SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS for INDIVIDUALS¹

As public pools have closed due to Covid-19, Swimming Natation Canada (SNC) has had multiple inquiries regarding open water swimming. Please be advised that SNC does not regulate, supervise, sanction or recommend training activities by individuals in an open water setting. Any registrant who chooses to swim in an open water setting does so of their own volition and at their own risk. SNC does not assume any liability for injuries or death related to any non-sanctioned open water activity.

Further, all persons are required, at all times, to observe all applicable municipal, provincial and federal regulations that may regulate this type of activity.

Before entering a body of water and heading off for a swim there are many safety considerations to examine to assure your safe return to shore afterwards.

Remember that when swimming anywhere but in a pool there is no wall every 25m or 50m to stop and hang on to, no lane line next to you to reach out for, and no bottom to stand on. There may be waves, currents, weeds, and the water, colder than you are used to.

For those individuals who choose to engage in open water activities, we ask that swimmers please take into account the following considerations as you develop your individual risk assessment:

- **Have you ever swum open water before?** Safety should be of the utmost importance and your experience is an important consideration. If you have never completed an open water swim before, it is recommended to start slowly and ensure you have reviewed and have the answers to all the questions below. A short swim to get the feel of being in a new environment that is completely different from pool swimming would be an important first step. Because there are no pace clocks, walls, or points of reference to know how quickly or slowly you are going, pacing can be a challenge.
- **Do you have any pre-existing health conditions?** Do you have any pre-existing health conditions such as: heart condition; shortness of breath, dizziness, drug or alcohol usage, epilepsy, pregnancy, diabetes etc, and if so, you may want to have your personal medical physician provide guidance on any open water swimming training. Heart attacks are the most common cause of drowning with masters swimming in open water.
- **What is the water quality?** Is there the presence of blue-green algae, has there been run-off from the farmers' fields from recent rains, has there been an environmental spill in the area which may affect water quality? The clarity of the water, as well as physical water contamination should be reviewed. Water quality can be found online for most bodies of water through a variety of online tools and apps.
- **Where will you be getting in the water, how will you get in and get out safely?** Never dive into unknown waters. A slow entry to the water will allow for gradual acclimation.
- **What is the water temperature?** Below 20C, the use of a wetsuit is strongly recommended. Depending on the individual, a wetsuit may be desired below 25C. The water temperature at the shoreline may be considerably warmer than out in the deeper, faster moving areas of the

¹ "Individuals" means those swimmer(s) choosing to swim/train open water outside of a club training session.



body of water. Water temperature may also be found for many bodies of water through a variety of online tools and apps.

- **What are the water and weather conditions?** Are there currents, undertow, or debris in which you may become entangled or be injured? It is very difficult to spot rips/undertows unless you know what to look for so this should be a strong consideration dependent on the body of water. Are the swells and waves manageable? Have you reviewed the Beaufort wind scale for current conditions? Are the conditions likely to change during your swim? Has there been a forecast of storms, lightening, thunder or otherwise, winds, low pressure systems moving through the area, fog? You must be aware of the long- and short-term forecasts. These meteorological events must be considered when evaluating the safety of open water swimming. Other considerations should include the depth of the body of water, blind spots, glare and inlets. You must have a plan in place to deal with any weather/environmental issues that may arise during your swim.
- **What is the traffic on the body of water you are considering?** Are there motorboats, jet-skis, surfboarders, sailboats or other watercraft? Jet-skis are a major hazard and can be deadly to the open water swimmer. You must also be aware of buoy colours for watercraft and any prohibited slips/channels that may be part of the body of water. It will be important to be highly visible, the wearing of a fluorescent bathing cap and using swim buoy are strongly recommended.
- **Who will you be swimming with, will there be other swimmers, will there be a someone with you in a boat, kayak or canoe or watching from the shoreline?** Swimming should **NEVER** be a solo activity. No matter how well you swim, swimming alone is dangerous. Even the strongest swimmers can encounter dangers in the water. The use of a safety buoy is also strongly recommended in all circumstances. When swimming with others, communication is key to keeping everyone safe. Maintain close enough contact to be able to request assistance or provide aid. A “raised arm” protocol should be put into place to alert those watching your swim that you require assistance. The presence of assistance in a watercraft is ultimately the best scenario for open water swimming. If it is motorized, be sure that the propeller is equipped with a prop guard for your safety.
- **Should you require assistance during your swim how will you get it, where will you go?** You should be aware of the surrounding environment and where help is located. Be aware of whether there will be any lifeguards present who might be of assistance.
- **What route will you be swimming?** Considerations of the route you are going to swim once entering the water should take all of the above conditions into account. Is there water safety signage posted? Remaining parallel to the shoreline may be the safest option to find shallow water should a cramp arise, the weather changes, or water conditions not be as desirable as expected. Point to point or crossing a body of water swims may be exhilarating, however safety considerations are more elevated as the distance from shore and help, should it be required, can be greater. Be aware that the short swim across the local lake may be farther than you expect, or what you may normally swim in a daily pool workout without breaks for water and coaching.



Additional Resources:

Lifesaving Society – Safety Standards – Signage Standards

<https://www.lifesaving.ca/cmsUploads/lifesaving/File/Signage-Standard-April-2017.pdf>

Lifesaving Society – Safety Standards – Extreme Weather

<https://www.lifesaving.ca/cmsUploads/lifesaving/File/Extreme-Weather-Lightning-Standard-May-2016.pdf>

Red Cross – Open Water Safety Tips <https://www.redcross.ca/training-and-certification/swimming-and-water-safety-tips-and-resources/swimming-boating-and-water-safety-tips/open-water>

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