

Women's guide to triathlon – swimming

Women are well suited to swimming because they have a naturally higher percentage of body fat than men, a greater natural tolerance for cold water and proportionally longer leg to torso length. Swimming is integral to triathlon but it's also a hugely beneficial cross-training exercise. It delivers powerful upper-body strength gains that you won't get from cycling or running.

As with all these disciplines, women are faced with slightly different challenges than men when it comes to swimming. But with the right advice and some new techniques you can overcome those challenges and take your swimming to a new level.

Advantages of swimming

Swimming offers great fitness gains as well as toning, weight-loss and relaxation benefits, and it's universally renowned as a great all-round exercise. It provides a way to strengthen and tone your upper body, taking the strain off over-worked knees, and allows you to train during pregnancy and post-natal recuperation.



The only negatives are the potential embarrassment factor if you're unhappy with your shape and having to train with others if you prefer to work out alone. However, these challenges are minor in comparison to swimming's huge rewards, and are easily overcome with a bit of common sense.

True, swimming costumes are hardly the most flattering or concealing outfits around but then nor is your tri suit. Besides, no-one really cares what you look like, because they're all too busy worrying about their own swimming (and possibly their own bums and bellies too).

Lanes can get very busy during public sessions and swimmers in the fast (or sprint) lanes can be somewhat territorial and might try a few intimidation tactics in order to keep their lane less busy. In an ideal world you'd always have a lane to yourself but at peak times you have as much right to swim as anyone else in the pool. As long as you've chosen the correct lane for your speed, then away you go.

The best approach is to be as focused and serious about your session as the others in your lane and to observe the unwritten rules of lane discipline. So don't stand across the middle of the end wall and, if someone taps your toes, let them pass. Also, check the pool's policy on the use of fins and paddles before you strap them on and start swimming.

Equipment

When it comes to kit, most swimwear manufacturers, including Speedo, Diana, Zoggs, Maru and Tyr, cater well for female swimmers. However, it's not just costumes and goggles you need to worry about. Fins and paddles will help your training but you need to find the right ones for you – not just for your gender but also for your ability.

Some fins and paddles are better for women simply because of their smaller size. Barracuda paddles are small, stiff and well designed to fit smaller hands ergonomically, and Zoggs Flexi-Paddles are small and flexible – great for girls and anyone new to paddles.

Tailored training

There's no reason for men and women to train any differently in the pool. In any club or masters session you'll see guys and girls mixed fairly equally, whether in the fast or the slow lane. In fact, only 6secs divides the male and female 100m long course freestyle world records (47:84secs and 53:52secs, respectively).

Training sessions should therefore be tailored to your ability and fitness levels rather than gender. However, it's worth noting that men are more likely to have wider shoulders and stronger upper bodies, so it's worth investing your time in some strength training if you want to improve your times in the pool.

Try classic tricep dips (on a chair) to build a powerful push-phase. To tone and strengthen your deltoids, try front and side deltoid lifts and reverse flys. For your lats, try upright rows.

Three x 8-12 reps of the above with light to moderate weights (don't overdo it or you'll be too sore to swim) will gradually build upper-body strength, improving your pull in the water.

Don't forget your small but all-important rotator cuffs – using small weights, make tiny controlled circles with outstretched arms (both to the side and in front of you) to guard against tendon injury.

Open-water swimming doesn't need any gender-specific training – after all, fear of open water affects guys too. But there are plenty of wetsuits designed for women to maximise the efficiency of your open-water swim.

Quintana Roo, Orca, Ironman and Foor all offer women's suits; in fact, most brands have a female option. Try on a selection as everyone's built differently and fit and comfort are crucial. Consider cutting a little bit off the ends of the sleeves and legs if they prove too long.

In mixed open-water races, don't get bullied to the sides or back of the pack just because you might be smaller or less aggressive than some male competitors. Be realistic and place yourself at the best spot in the pack for you – whether that's out front, towards the rear or at the side – and be prepared to defend your spot. When you're in a pack situation you need to maintain your focus and not get distracted by the actions of other competitors. Concentrate on getting yourself through the clearest line of water.

Practicalities

Swimming is a great session to fit into a lunchtime but, if you need to stay well-groomed for the office, the dry-ing off and chlorinated look won't do you many favours. Sadly, there's no real way round this other than getting out of the pool 5mins early to wash and dry your hair and to re-apply make-up (unless you can get away with waterproof mascara).

Ultra Swim shampoo and conditioner will remove chlorine from your hair (available from most swimwear suppliers) or you can protect hair before you swim by running some conditioner through it. Always wear a swim-cap – quite apart from keeping hair out of your eyes, it prevents your goggle strap from tearing at your hair and slowly wrecking it.

Swimming often seems a cosier and less challenging option than biking or running if you're not feeling good or the weather's bad. Obviously, there'll be days when getting out in the fresh air is what you fancy, but for days when you want a full body, tri-specific workout, swimming is exactly what you need.