

OPEN WATER SWIMMING

A Guidance for Masters Clubs A Resource for Swimmers

June 2020



**Canadian Independent
Masters Swimming
Maîtres-nageurs indépendants du Canada**



Introduction

This guidance is primarily for CIMS, MSM and MSO-affiliated clubs offering club-organized Open Water Swimming (OWS) under the corporation's insurance. It is also intended as a resource for individual masters swimmers who choose to swim independently of an organized club. **MSO does not have oversight of individual training activities outside the club setting and MSO insurance coverage does not apply to these activities.**

Swimmers and clubs are looking to open water following the shutdown of swimming pools during the COVID-19 Pandemic. We remind you that *spring and early season water temperatures can be dangerously cold even with a wetsuit. Irrespective of swimmer OWS experience, use caution when considering open water.*

The Rules and Safety Guidelines for OWS Competition are well established. They include the FINA rules and adapted locally by swimming Federations. Sanctioned events are highly regulated and supervised. Most, if not all organized OWS swimming, involves Safety Plans developed in concert with persons trained in the Lifesaving Society's *Waterfront Safety Standards*.

However, there is currently less information readily available for clubs and individuals wishing to train in open water.

Provincial regulations and local bylaws impacting OWS need to be respected. This now includes current COVID-19 restrictions for venues, physical distancing and participation numbers, etc.

We welcome input and comment that will improve this document as interest in OWS increases.

Acknowledgment

A list of references is included at the end of this document. We also thank all those who commented on previous drafts, including (in alpha order) Duane Jones (TECH), Wanda Mathers (Wonder Athletes, MN), Phil Rogers (TECH) and Doug Vanderby (NT).

Contents

Introduction	1
1. What are the current COVID-19 restrictions?	3
2. Research your training site	3
3. Plan for Emergencies	3
3.1 Never swim alone!!!!	3
3.2 Club Safety Planning	4
3.3 Know your body	4
3.4 Swimmer Equipment	5
3.5 About Wetsuits	5
4. Weather and Water Conditions	5
4.1 How cold is cold?	6
4.2 Enter the water slowly	6
4.3 Post Swim	7
Resources and References	7

1. What are the current COVID-19 restrictions?

COVID-19 restrictions change as the pandemic progresses. Step one of any training plan, individual or club, is to verify that your planned activity meets guidelines for:

- Permitted club-organized activities
- Numbers of individuals from different households who may gather
- Physical distancing requirements, including arrival, changing and post swim
- Permitted venues

Resources: [Public Health Agency of Canada](#); [Ontario Public Health](#); check your local Municipal Public Health website.

2. Research your training site

Whether swimming as an individual or organizing a club session:

- For public sites, is the site open and is it supervised?
- For private sites, do you have permission to swim at the location?
- Is a permit required for club-organized swims?
- Is there a safe entry and exit point that permits gradual acclimatization to the water?
- Is there a clear swimming area? Avoid weirs, locks and other structures. Look for floating objects, motorized watercraft or fuel emissions that could pose a risk.
- Respect any signs that say, “No swimming” or “Danger”
- Research and respect currents.
- Where possible swim along the shoreline as close to the shore as safe to do so.

3. Plan for Emergencies

3.1 Never swim alone!!!!

If you choose not to swim in a club-organized practice, do not swim alone.

- Even if you are an experienced, strong swimmer.
- Even if you are swimming in a supervised area.
- Especially if you are new to the OWS environment, irrespective of your pool abilities.

Let someone know where you are, what you are doing and when you expect to return. Prepare and follow a personal safety plan.

Select a swimming buddy.

- Ideally, have an appropriate escort craft (boat, canoe, open kayak, paddle board, etc.) equipped with a rescue tube and flippers.

- If you swim with an in-water buddy, be aware of each other's location during and after the swim.
- Will somebody be watching from shore, ready to take action in the event you and/or your buddy need assistance?
- Swim close to or parallel with the shore.
- Select a landmark for your start and end. Occasionally "pop-up" to sight your landmark and stay on course.

3.2 Club Safety Planning

A club-organized training session must have an OWS Safety Plan. The plan should be developed with a resource certified with Waterfront NLS by the provincial Lifesaving Society¹.

- Research your site (see 2 above)
- Review the Lifesaving Society Waterfront Safety Standards¹
- Review the Swim Canada OWS (Race) Safety Guidelines² for any elements that might also apply to a training environment.

The following should be included in planning (not exhaustive):

- A qualified coach and/or lifeguard, certified with Waterfront NLS, First Aid and CPR should be on the water accompanying swimmers, i.e., on the water in an appropriate craft, not in the water!

Lifeguards/lifesavers should be properly equipped with rescue tubes (not tow floats)

- The more swimmers in the group, the more lifeguards/lifesavers on water
- Use the buddy system in practice, i.e., pair up your swimmers
- Ensure that swimmers can landmark the start and end of the swim.
- Plan for the evacuation of swimmers in the event of changing conditions.
- Plan for the evacuation of a rescued swimmer to EMS.

Have assistance on the shore, preferably certified Waterfront NLS, first aid and CPR.

- Have telephone communications available should 911 be required.

3.3 Know your body

Consider your health. Do you have any pre-existing medical conditions that might affect your ability in an OWS environment, especially in cold water?

If you are swimming with a club, the coach must be informed of any medical conditions.

3.4 Swimmer Equipment

- Wetsuits should be used for cool water temperatures. (See - *How cold is cold?* below). The SH₂OUT³ guidance, jointly developed by *British Triathlon, Royal Lifesaving UK and Swim England*, describes considerations for fitting a wetsuit.
- A wetsuit not only provides insulation against cold or cooler water, it also provides a degree of buoyancy to the swimmer, thus reducing total effort over the distance swum
- Well-fitting goggles are recommended.
- A highly visible swim cap is essential, especially if there are boats operating in the vicinity.
- Consider a tow float, secured to the swimmer.
 - It significantly increases visibility from land and water, e.g., boaters and jet skiers
 - It can be a “rest stop” should a swimmer require a break or to catch a breath
 - Some models provide for phone, wallet, key storage
BUT Remember
 - **A tow float is NOT a rescue device**
 - A tow float can take you off course in heavy wind or waves.

3.5 About Wetsuits

- Wetsuits are recommended within the temperature ranges listed below.
- Research wetsuits to ensure that your style/model is suitable for the water conditions.
- Wetsuits that are too tight can restrict movement and possibly breathing. If they are too loose water will enter creating drag and compromising the insulating properties of the suit¹.
- SH₂OUT provides the following checklist when putting on a wetsuit:
 - The wetsuit should fit snugly – particularly around the neck where a good seal helps prevent excess water from entering the suit.
 - There should be a comfortable fit from the crotch to shoulder so that arm reach and flexibility are not restricted.
 - There should be correct length in the arms and legs without excess material being gathered up that will increase drag
 - The zipper goes to the back.

4. Weather and Water Conditions

- Never swim in an electrical storm.
- If violent weather is expected, don't start your swim. If a storm unexpectedly pops up, get to shore and take cover.
- Strong winds make for difficult waves and can add wind chill, which makes you feel colder than expected.
- A large difference between water and air temperature may require longer acclimatization.

4.1 How cold is cold?

“The colder the water and air temperature, the quicker you will cool down. The colder it is the less time you should spend in the water.¹”

Allow yourself to acclimatize to OWS, especially early in the season, by focusing on TIME spent in the water. Build to a distance focus gradually.

While cold water gets a lot of attention, there are also warm water guidelines to OWS.

Swim Canada’s 2014 OWS (Race) Safety Guidelines² state:

- 1) *If the water temperature is below 16 C (60.80 F), no race can be held.*
- 2) *For races of 5 km and above, if the water is above 31 C (87.80 F), no race can be held.*
- 3) *If the air temperature and water temperature added together (in Celsius) are less than a total of 30, no race can be held.*
- 4) *If the air temperature and water temperature added together (in Celsius) are greater than 63, no race can be held.*

OWS swimmers use wetsuits for cold or cool water swimming. However, there are both lower and upper temperature limits to the safe use of wetsuit for racing. The *OWS Rules* pertaining to wetsuits are as follows:

- *The lowest possible temperature of the water should remain at 16°C (throughout the course)*
- *Between 16°C and 18°C wetsuits are mandatory*
- *Between 18°C and 22°C, wetsuits are optional*
- *Over 22°C, wetsuits are not allowed*

These temperature ranges must be respected for any club-organized activity.

4.2 Enter the water slowly

SH₂OUT provides the following guidance on entering and leaving the water:

- Prior to entering the water, plan your exit point. Ensure you have an easy exit point. Make sure you have access to your towel and warm clothes quickly.
- Enter the water slowly to acclimatise to the water temperature – do not jump in.
 - You need to be able to regulate your breathing close to your water entry point in case you panic and need to exit.
- Immerse yourself slowly
- Put your face in the water
- Take some deep breaths
- Gently tread water slowly moving your legs and arms
- A wetsuit can affect your breathing (*see About Wetsuits*)

- If you become nervous or uncomfortable, it is recommended that you roll on to your back and float, and breathe deeply until you regain control.

4.3 Post Swim

SH₂OUT provides the following guidance on leaving the water and recovery.

In cold swim situations:

- Dry off and dress immediately. This reduces the risks of further lowering your core temperature.
- Protect yourself from wind or further chill.
- Refuel with a hot/warm drink to maintain body temperature.

In warm weather situations:

- If you feel hot or overheated, you may need to sit in the shallow water (if possible) before exiting, to help reduce your body temperature.

Resources and References

1. [Waterfront Safety Standards](#), 2004, Lifesaving Society
2. [Open Water Safety Guide](#), December 2014, Swim Canada (for Competition)
3. [COVID-19 Guidance to Open Water Swimmers](#), v1 May 12, 2020, SH₂OUT, (*jointly developed by British Triathlon, Royal Lifesaving UK and Swim England*)
4. [Norseman Swim Code](#), Zalaris Norseman Xtreme Triathlon, Norway
5. [What to Know about Early-Season Open Water Swimming](#), April 3, 2020, USMS Article
6. [Get out there and have some fun, safely](#), September 3, 2013, USMS article
7. [Safety Tips for the Across the Lake Swim](#), Kelowna BC, (see tips for sighting)