



OPEN WATER SWIMMING SAFETY GUIDELINES

Coaching a training group

The following document is published by Swim Ontario with Swimming Canada's approval and is revised from the original with an Appendix A, the bullet point risk assessment from the OPEN WATER SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS for INDIVIDUALS.

In light of COVID-19, Swimming Canada has received multiple inquiries regarding coach led open water training with their swimmers. In response to these inquiries, Swimming Canada has created this initial version of our safety guidelines in an accelerated fashion to address the immediate needs of the swimming community. A second version of the guidelines will be prepared in due course.

Open Water training should only be initiated once municipal, provincial and federal regulations permit the resumption of this type of activity. All the overarching health, medical and safety considerations must be adhered to.

Before deciding to take your swimmers off to the lake or other body of water for a workout there are considerations for the safety of everyone that must be examined. The safety concerns of open water swimming found in Appendix A must be reviewed as part of the overall risk assessment. **Provincial sections may have additional requirements that clubs/coaches must meet.**

In order for a club training group to be considered as an approved (insured) activity, a checklist must be completed (see below, Appendix B). Your provincial section may provide their own checklist to be completed rather than the one shared below. Should a club/coach answer "no" to any of the questions, the club will need to work with their provincial section to determine if open water training can be considered as an approved (insured) activity, with the risks mitigated. If risk mitigation is not possible then coach led open water training should not be undertaken.

1. Does the coach have experience coaching swimmers who have attended any sanctioned provincial open water events, Provincial open water championship, Canadian Junior open water championship, or OW event at higher level, and has the coach attended the open water competition with the swimmers and actively participated in their preparation?
2. Are the swimmers over the age of 11, and have they competed in a sanctioned open water event in their province, a provincial open water championship, Canadian Junior Championship OW event, or event at higher level?
3. Do you have a designated and experienced NLS certified safety person, kayaking alongside or accompanying on the shoreline line? And do you have the necessary # of boats/accompanying safety persons for the # of swimmers you have training, maintaining a 1:10 ratio (safety person to swimmers)? A safety person is NOT a swimmer or coach participating in the training. The individual is designated solely as the safety person for the open water training activity.
4. Have you completed a review of the body of water to be used for training, considering water temperature, safety considerations (water quality, visibility, access points, current and expected water conditions, man-made and natural obstacles)?
5. Is the route the swimmers will be using visible at all times by the coach and/or safety person?
6. Has an emergency action plan (EAP) detailing the chain of command and what happens during and after any emergency, been developed?
7. Have all swimmers and/or parents signed the Acknowledgement and Assumption of Risks form?
8. Has your club board reviewed the checklist, the emergency action plan, and confirmed all items have been completed satisfactorily by signing the checklist and retaining on file? Has your club met any additional provincial section requirements?



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Appendix A – 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 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, and 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.



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- **Who will you be swimming with, will there be other swimmers, will there be 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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Appendix B

SAMPLE OPEN WATER TRAINING CHECKLIST to be kept on file by Club with all waivers.

Question		YES	NOTES
1	Coach Experience – attendance at OW provincial and/or Canadian Juniors or above		
2	Swimmer Experience – min 11 years old, participation in OW event at provincial level and/or Canadian Juniors or above		
3	Safety Person – NLS certified and experienced kayaker on water or on shoreline, ration 1:10 to # of swimmers		
4	Site Review – completed with all specifics documented		
5	Route – viewable with safety person		
6	Emergency Action Plan – completed and documented		
7	Acknowledgement and Assumption of Risks form – for all participants completed and on file		
8	Board Review – completed, documented and on file, provincial requirements met		

Signed by:

Club President: _____

Head Coach: _____

Date: _____

Date: _____