

Swimming in Benefits for Heart Health



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The best exercise you can do for your heart is often the one that you can do consistently. In terms of convenience, walking is hard to beat. It's accessible, low-impact and no special equipment is needed. But when it comes to cardiovascular benefits, swimming may take the gold.

"Swimming is often recommended as a heart-healthy form of exercise, especially for people living with cardiovascular conditions," explains Dr. Ted Hodges, WakeMed Heart & Vascular - Cardiology. "It offers a unique combination of low-impact movement, full-body engagement and aerobic conditioning, making it an excellent option for those looking to improve heart health in a safe and enjoyable way."

If you're dipping your toes into swimming for the first time, don't be intimidated by the Olympic sport you've seen on TV. Swimming can be adapted for any mobility, intensity or age.

5 Health Benefits of Swimming

- 1 Cardio Is Key:** Cardiovascular exercise is any activity – including swimming – that raises your heart rate and breathing, increasing your overall blood flow. Cardio activity is a key factor to a healthy heart and is shown to improve cholesterol levels, reduce blood pressure and lower your risk of heart disease.

Multiple studies conducted over the past few decades have found a direct correlation between how much adults swim and the health of their hearts. A study conducted at the University of Texas found that swimmers' systolic blood pressure (the top number) dropped an average of 9 points after they started swimming a few times a week.

- 2 Easy on the Joints:** "One of the most significant advantages of swimming is that it provides cardiovascular benefits without placing stress on the joints," says Dr. Hodges. The buoyancy of water supports the body, making movement easier and more comfortable, while reaping the muscle-building benefits of water resistance.

This makes swimming an excellent exercise for individuals with conditions that cause stiffness or joint pain, such as arthritis or obesity, where weight-bearing activities like walking or jogging can be difficult.



The Health and Wellbeing Benefits of Swimming Report, commissioned by Swim England, found that swimmers have a:

41%

lower risk of death due to heart disease or stroke

28%

lower risk of early death overall

3 Supports Weight Management: Swimming is a full-body workout, because the water adds resistance that requires all of your body to fight against it. Like other forms of cardio, it burns calories and can help support a healthy weight. It's often cited as one of the highest calorie-burning exercises, resulting in an average of 200 to 300 calories burned in just 30 minutes.

4 Enhances Lung Capacity: Spending more time underwater may help you breathe more easily above water. Swimming is a great training tool for your lungs. It requires you to control your breathing, which strengthens the lung's capacity and improves endurance. Increased lung capacity allows the heart and lungs to work more efficiently together, leading to better cardiovascular endurance.

5 Supports Stress Management: Managing stress plays a key role in heart health and heart attack prevention. Thanks to the soothing effect of water and the meditative nature of rhythmic breathing, swimming can reduce stress along with symptoms of depression and anxiety.

In fact, a study published in *The Journal of Rehabilitation Medicine* found that women who swam regularly for eight months reported a 41 percent improvement in anxiety and a 27 percent improvement in depression.

More Ways to Move in Water

If swimming laps isn't your thing, try water aerobics or walking. Water aerobic classes are led by a trained instructor, typically in waist-deep to chest-deep water. Often set to music, classes incorporate a variety of exercises walking, jogging, dance and strength training using the water's resistance or pool props (like noodles or weights). Walking in the water is easy on the joints while offering resistance—making it a great option if you're new to working out or recovering from a heart attack, stroke or surgery.

Swimming with a Heart Condition: Talk to Your Doctor

While the benefits of swimming are clear, individuals managing a heart condition should approach this form of exercise thoughtfully, according to Dr. Hodges. "Before starting a new swimming routine, it's very important to talk with a health care provider. A medical professional can help determine whether swimming is appropriate for your specific condition and may recommend certain precautions or initial assessments, such as a stress test."

Tips to Get Started

Find a pool. Search online for a local aquatic center or YMCA with an indoor pool for year-round access. And look for a lifeguard! The safest way to swim is with trained professionals on hand in case of emergencies, especially for those at risk of a cardiovascular event.

Start slow. It's not a race. Don't expect to start out swimming Olympic-laps for a half hour. If you're a beginner, start with five to 10 minutes of lap swimming, focus on your breathing, strokes and kicks.

Switch up your strokes. Freestyle, backstroke, butterfly, etc.—mixing up your strokes will work different muscles and keep your workouts feeling fresh. You can also try other movements like treading, walking or aerobics that are just as beneficial.

Stop if you feel pain. Listen to your body and get out of the water if you feel any discomfort. "If you feel dizzy, unusually short of breath, overly fatigued or experience chest discomfort while swimming, stop immediately and seek medical attention if needed," says Dr. Hodges. "Building endurance slowly and steadily is far more beneficial—and safer—than pushing too hard, too soon."



Add Bone-Building Workouts

It's important to note that swimming doesn't offer benefits to bone health. To keep your bones strong, it is important to supplement swimming with weight-bearing exercise, like strength training, walking, dancing, stair climbing or yoga.