

Swimming and playing in water safely: Q & A

Swimming outdoors in lakes and rivers is fun, and it isn't dangerous compared to many other activities, but there are some risks. These are important things to know so that you can swim safely when there are no lifeguards to keep you safe. Questions you might ask; Answers; 'Dos':

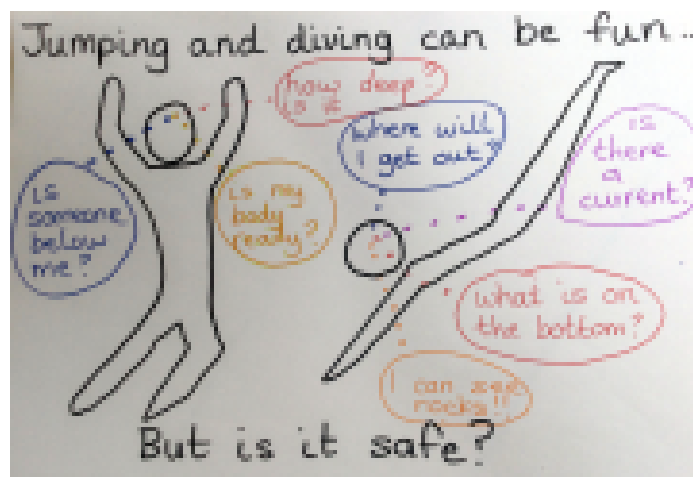
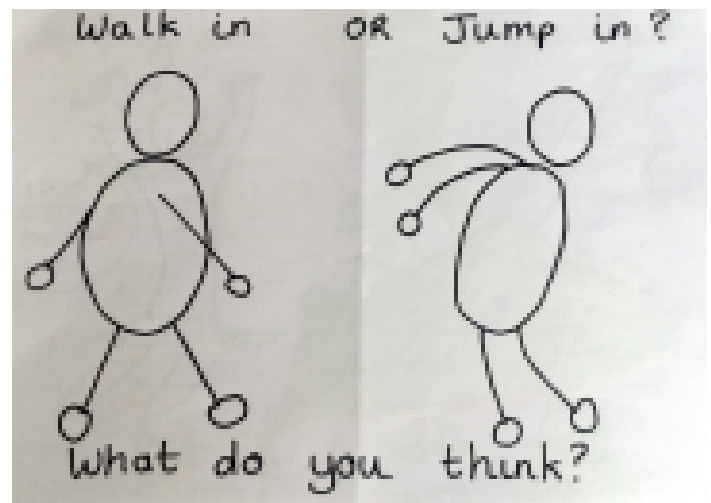
1.

Q. Is it best to jump in to get it over with, or to walk into the water?

A. It's usually safer to walk into the water first, then you could jump when you're used to the cold.

If you go too quickly into cold water, you can get something called cold water shock, which is an automatic gasp. If this happened when you are under the water, then you could breathe in water instead of air, and could drown. It can also make you breathe very fast, or to panic.

Do: Get in to the water gradually so you have time to get used to the temperature and let your breathing calm down before you swim or put your head in or jump.



2.

Q. If I want to jump or dive, what should I look for first?

A. Here's what to check:

- Is it deep enough?
- Are there any rocks, branches or other people in the way?
- Do you know where you're going to get out?
- Is there a current that will sweep you away?
- Are you used to the cool water yet?

Do: Look before you leap! And go in and swim a bit first before jumping, to get used to the cool water and check the depth.

3.

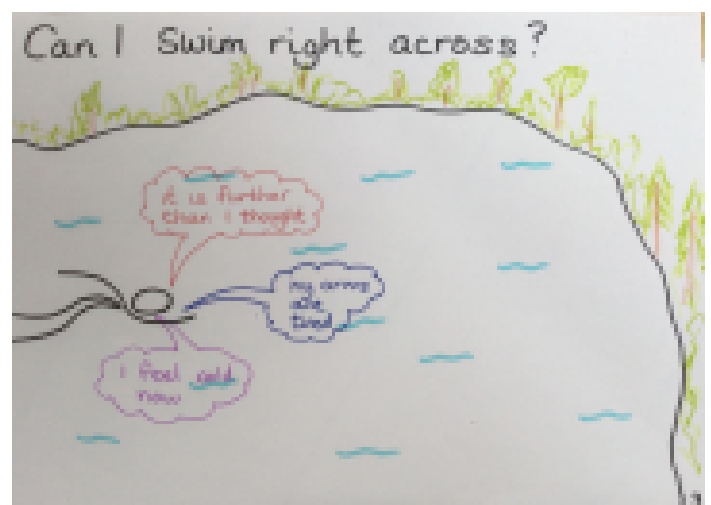
Q. Can I swim across a lake – would that be safe?

A. Think about this first:

Are you a strong enough swimmer to get back? You might be a good swimmer in a pool, but swimming outdoors is different – cooler and more tiring.

Did you know that if you get cold your muscles don't work as well? If you're in the middle of a lake it can be very hard to get back, and you can sink into the water and drown. (This is called swim failure or cold incapacitation.)

Inflatable toys and boats can take you too far out and if you don't swim well you might not be able to swim back if you fall off or they burst. Tow floats and armbands are not enough, and if going on a boat you should always wear a lifejacket if you can't swim and a buoyancy aid if you can.



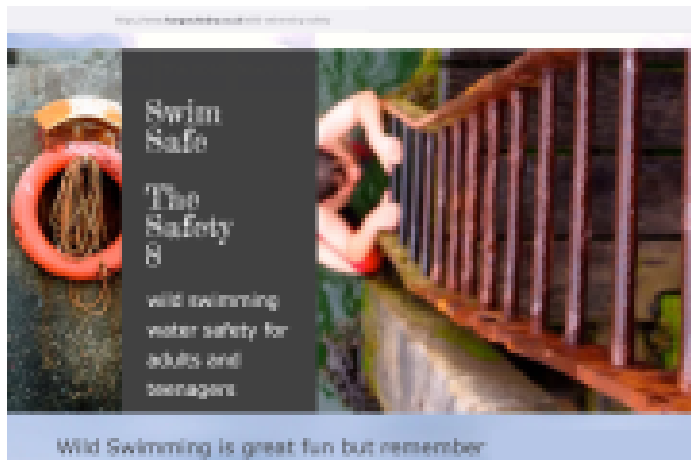
Do: Stay near the shore, unless you are an experienced swimmer who is used to cool water. Be very cautious about inflatables, especially for weak or non-swimmers.

4.

Q. Will I get too cold? What can happen if I get cold?

A. You could get cold. Though in summer lakes and rivers can be very warm, swimming outdoors is colder than in a pool. You can gradually get colder without realising it, and if this happens a long way from the shore you might not be able to swim back, and could even drown (this is called cold incapacitation or swim failure). If you stay in a long time and get very cold you can get hypothermia, which can be dangerous. It is nicer to get out before you get really cold. You can wear a wetsuit, and swim shoes and gloves, but it's still possible to get cold.

Do: Get out before you get cold and get dressed quickly in some warm clothes. Stay near the shore, so if you get cold and tired you can easily get out.



5.

Q. Is it safe to swim in deep water?

A. This depends on how strong and experienced a swimmer you are. If you're not a very good swimmer, and you panic and can't put your feet down, you could be in trouble. Deep water is okay if you can swim well and are used to the cold.

Do: If you are not a strong swimmer then it is better to stay in shallower water where you can stand up if you need to.

image: <https://www.hungouttodry.co.uk/wild-swimming-safety>

6.

Q. What should I look out for if I swim in a river?

A. Rivers can have currents that can wash you downstream and past where you were planning to get out.

Weirs and waterfalls have fast moving water, and because there is more air in the water it is harder to float. The way the water moves can pull you under the water, and some weirs can trap you so are best avoided.

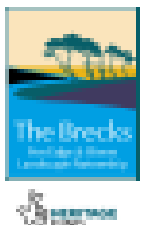
There might be steep banks making it hard to get out easily, especially if you are cold.

Look out for things you could get caught on or hurt yourself on, like branches or rocks or litter.

Do: Check before you get in, to see where you are going to get out and also have a second place further downstream. If possible walk along the bank and look at the water, how fast it is (you can throw in a stick and see what it does), and if there are any rocks or branches.



Q & A Note written by Imogen Radford, September 2022 (@OSBrecks). I have included information that I believe to be accurate and helpful, but I take no responsibility for swimmers. All outdoor swimmers must be solely responsible for making their own assessment on the risks of any sort of swimming or related activity, and are responsible for the safety of their children or dependants. Landowners/land managers need to do their own risk assessments. Note provided as part of the Healing Waters project, part of BFER, <http://www.brecks.org/BFER/>; the scheme also takes no responsibility for information included in this note. Six images drawn by Tina Potter, project volunteer.



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Questions you might ask; Answers; 'Dos':

7.

Q. What animals and plants might be in the water? And can they harm me?

A.

Swans – will generally keep away from you, but keep away if they have babies because they will want to protect them.

Fish – will keep away from you

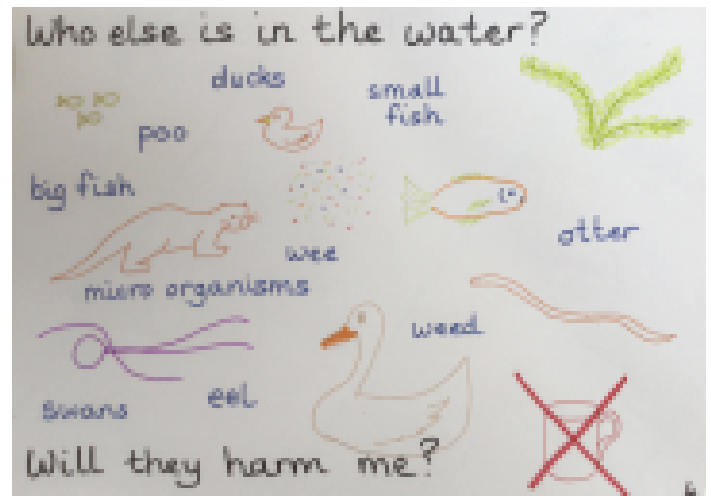
Grass Snakes – will keep away from you and not hurt you

Weeds – there are lots of different sorts of water plants/weeds, and most are not likely to entangle you. You can get mixed up with them, especially if your hands are moving in a circle, and if you are not used to them they can make you panic.

Weeds will not drag you down under the water.

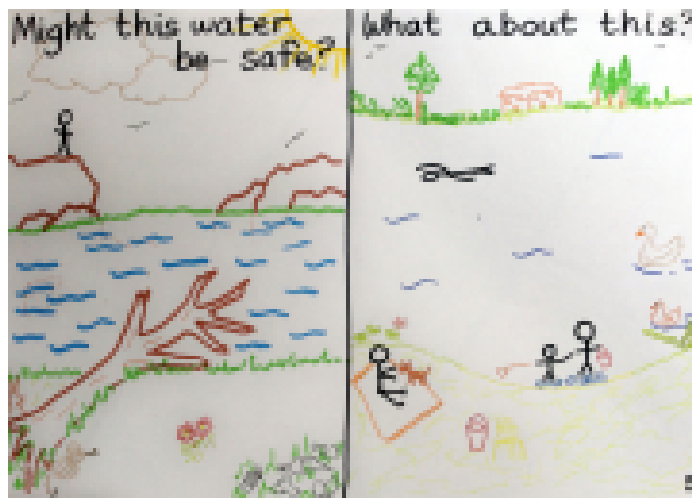
Reeds – these are usually at the edge, and where they are is not the best place to get in, but they won't harm you.

All creatures and plants are part of nature, and show it is clean water, so it's important to look after them and not hurt them. You can get used to weeds, and you could use goggles or a snorkel to watch the fish and other wildlife under water.



Do: Avoid diving or jumping into a weedy area. Try not to panic if you feel weeds – float on your back and slowly swim out with your legs.

Stay calm around swans and other wildlife, especially if they have babies.



9.

Q. Is it best to always go swimming with friends or family?

A. Yes, it's usually best, because if something happens someone can call or go for help. If going alone be extra careful and tell somebody where you are going and when you come back.

When you're with your friends, think about how much you can swim, not about doing the same thing as your friends or what they tell you to, nor pushing any friends to do the same things as you or to do anything they don't want to.

Do: Swim with others, but keep yourself safe.

8.

Q. Where can I go and swim? And how can I tell if it is safe if I've never been there before?

A. Ask in the local swim group, which will have lots of info on places that people have gone, and they can tell you more about those places. At a new place have a good look – for currents, depth of water, rocks or branches. Look for where you will get out of the water before thinking about getting in.

Do: Ask others. Always check the place carefully before getting in the water.

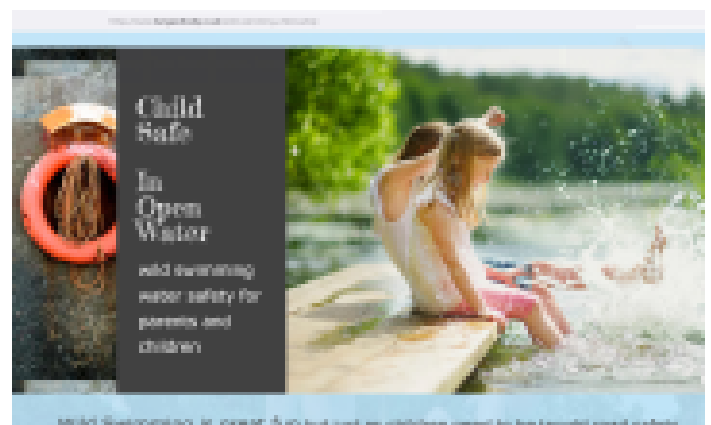


image: www.hungouttoday.co.uk/wild-swimming-child-safety

10.

Q. What should I do if I fall in, or get in trouble in the water, or get in a panic?

A. Float to Live!

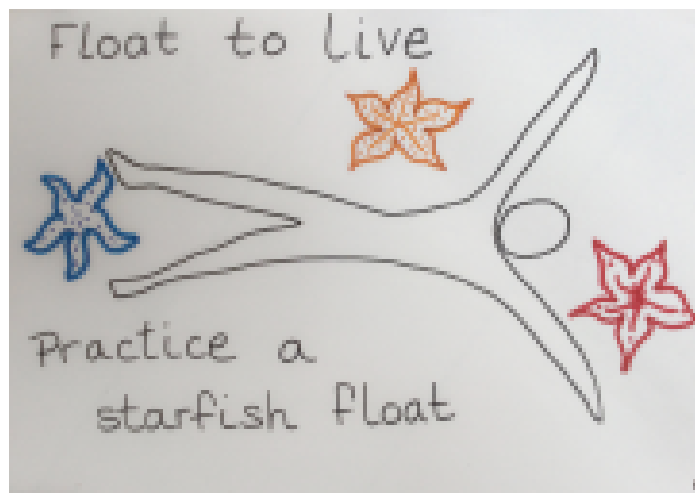
- If you fall in or are in a panic, try not to thrash around.
- Lean back, stretch out your arms and legs.
- If you need to, gently move them around to help you float.

– Float until you can control your breathing.

(There's a video showing this on the RNLI website, <https://rnli.org/pages/ppc/beach-safety/beach-safe-float>)

Have a practice – play at making starfish shapes.

Do: Practice floating so you can do it if you fall in or panic.



Screenshot from UK National Water Safety Forum
<https://respectthewater.com/>

12.

Q. Is the water clean, and how would I know?

A. Most water in the Brecks and most of East Anglia is clean. Look to see if it seems clean and smells okay. If you are not sure, don't get in, or keep your head out of the water. It's best to avoid rivers after heavy rain for a couple of days. Wash hands before eating.

Do: Look, smell, take care after rain in some places.



13.

Q. Should I worry about rats and Weil's Disease?

A. Some animals (not just rats) can spread bacteria that can cause a disease. It is very rare in this country.

Do: Always put a plaster on any cuts, and wash or sanitise your hands before eating. Go to the doctor if you don't feel well after you've been swimming, especially flu-like symptoms, tell them you've been in open water.

11.

Q. What should I do if someone is in trouble in the water?

A. Call 999, call for help. Fight your instinct to get into the water to try to save somebody as they might pull you under and drown you. Reach with a stick or throw something that floats instead, and tell them to float and try to calm them down.

Have the What3Words app on your phone, and know where you are if you need to call for help.

Do: CALL 999, TELL them to float, THROW something that floats, but don't get in



14.

Q. Where can I read more?

A.

- More info and links, <https://tinyurl.com/MoreInfoSwim>, on Imogen Radford's website
- Safety tips from the Outdoor Swimming Society, www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/summer-safety/
- Outdoor Swimming Society info on swim safety issues, www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/category/survive/
- The Outdoor Swimmers Code is about how we can care for nature in the places we swim and about other people who live or visit them, and can be responsible and safe swimmers, www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/outdoor-swimmers-code/

Do: Some reading and planning before you go, which can make a swim safer and more fun.

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