

Swimming and diet

To lose weight the energy expenditure must outweigh the input. Therefore the energy expenditure used in swimming must not be compensated by an increased amount of food taken if you are trying to lose weight.

Recreational swimming doesn't have a great reputation for weight reduction compared to other forms of aerobic exercise such as jogging and cycling and it is said to burn less fat than land-based workouts. It does however have other enormous benefits boosting strength, stamina and suppleness as well as providing a great cardiovascular workout with much less risk of injury as the natural buoyancy minimises the damage to joints.

One of the problems with swimming is that the effect of a good swim does seem to increase the appetite (as anyone who goes for a swim in the sea and gets out starving knows!) so it is very important to regulate what you eat as well. Recent evidence suggests one of the reasons for this is the temperature of the water is an important factor with cold water being a far greater stimulant to appetite than warm water.

Another factor may be that a gentle swim without raising the pulse much just doesn't use that much energy. Elite swimmers on the other have been shown to burn off 25% more energy than elite runners at maximum intensity for the same period of time and you only have to look at their excellent physiques to realize they don't carry any excess weight. Indeed some of the British Olympic team have as little as 4% of their body weight as fat!

Where then does this leave the average person who wants to use swimming as part of a weight reducing exercise programme?

Obviously a few lengths of gentle breaststroke without elevating the pulse rate much isn't going to burn off many calories although it will have some of the other benefits outlined above for those people that aren't very fit and it's certainly better than nothing. Water exercise is ideal in one respect for people who are overweight or have orthopedic problems as the natural buoyancy makes the exercise easier with you only weighing a tenth of your normal weight.

It is necessary to swim at sufficient intensity to elevate the pulse rate and for sufficient duration and at least 2-3 times per week. In order to sustain this technique is very important and it is worth investing in lessons to improve stroke proficiency and this will enable the swimmer to exercise for longer.

When the strokes have improved and a certain level of fitness-attained progress can be made to interval training using the pace clock and this will enable greater intensity of effort and thus calorie expenditure. Using a variety of strokes exercises all muscle groups with butterfly and breaststroke using the most energy.

It is best not to diet too drastically as you won't have enough energy to exercise and aim at a gradual and sustained weight reduction by changing eating habits. Drink plenty of fluids during the swim session with some glucose added, as this will be quickly burned off and provide instant energy.

Toning up from swimming will increase muscle bulk whilst replacing fat. However you may not lose weight as the specific gravity of muscle to fat is 1 to 0.7. Some track athletes are actually overweight if weight is the sole parameter due to their muscle bulk.

However, your body fat level will fall as measured with skin fold thickness. Swimming tones up all muscle groups hence the effect may be greater than other sports.

It is best to supplement a swimming regimen with other aerobic exercise if weight reduction is intended. Not many people swim for more than 1 hour and walking/gardening/cycling, which are also good aerobic exercises can be pursued for longer.