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IN THE SWIM

The ultimate exercise

Swimming boosts joint mobility, strengthens muscles, and has psychological benefits. By **Kate Hilpern**

After an aerobic exercise that will give you an all-over body workout? Look no further than swimming. "If I'm having a fat-bum day, I work my legs in the water. Or if I feel my arms need work, I'll focus on those," says the international award-winning swimmer Karen Pickering. "You just don't get that opportunity if you go for a run or go on a rowing machine."

Probably the biggest fans of swimming are GPs, not least because it strengthens the cardiovascular system, improves joint mobility and flexibility and strengthens muscles. There are psychological benefits too, according to the Swimming Teachers' Association (STA). The very nature of water massages the body, releasing endorphins that give the swimmer a sense of

wellbeing. "Whether swimming alone or with a group of friends, there are always people to meet at a social level," adds Irene Joyce, the association's aquatic development officer.

Swimming is suitable for any age group. "In fact, it's fantastic for families as it allows all individuals to be active at the same time and at their own pace," says personal trainer and swimming teacher Rachel Mann. "Unlike gyms and many other sports, there are no age restrictions or barriers to participation due to health or weight. Mum, dad and kids can all set themselves their own targets, and exercise together and encourage each other."

Swimming is also a great way to encourage children to be sporty and fit from a young age, says Chris Hayes,

the managing director of the British Swimming Pool Federation (BSPF). "With concerns about childhood obesity levels rising, this is an excellent solution, because it supports the weight of the body while exercising," he says.

With 4,000 swimming pools being built nationwide each year, including in people's private homes, according to the BSPF, there is unlikely to be a shortage of places to go to – and living on an island means there are plenty of places to go for a dip in the sea. So-called wild swimming in lakes and other open waters is increasingly popular, too.

Provided your child is more than three months old, there's nothing stopping them learning. In fact, says Jess Thompson, who runs Water Babies – structured swimming sessions for babies and children – the earlier the better. "Swimming with your baby is incredibly good for bonding and, having been in the womb for nine months, they love the feeling of being surrounded by warm water. Bouncing through the water is good for their nerve fibres too, and, from an incredibly early age, they get to understand and respond to your voice commands. It also means they grow up never having to learn to swim. They just do it."

There's the safety aspect, too. Drowning is the third most common cause of death in the UK among children under 16, with more than 50 children drowning every year. Yet an estimated one in five children leaves primary school unable to swim, and even as adults one in five of us can't swim. "In the past 18 months alone, we've had five children save themselves from drowning as result of our classes," says Thompson.

According to Dr Manoj Ramachandran, a paediatric and young adult orthopaedic consultant at Viveka Health practice in St John's Wood, swimming is particularly good for children of all ages.

"Because you're supported by the water, the amount of pressure going to your joints is not as much as higher-impact activities. Also, the types of movements you use during swimming tend to be more



Fit for life: swimming is a great way to encourage children to be sporty and stay fit from a young age GETTY IMAGES

gentle, unlike sports such as football, badminton and tennis where you plant your foot and twist your body in another direction, which can put enormous pressure on the foot, knees, hips and ankles." Swimming is affordable, too. Children under 16 and the over-60s can swim for free at more than 1,000 swimming pools across England. And swimming is now part of the National Curriculum as well as being a big focus of the Government's Change4Life campaign, which means swimming classes can be free.

But if you're looking for lessons for yourself or your child, make sure you find the right set-up for you. "Our classes only have three in a group," says Chris Rees, managing director of the Wessex Swim School. "We feel that with 20, you just can't get the individual attention that you need."

Rees adds that swimming can lead to many other things, such as triathlons, diving, sailing, kayaking and windsurfing. Although the benefits of swimming are equal among men and women, swimming has played a key role in getting women more active, according to the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation. "Girls leave school half as active as boys, and continue to be less active in adulthood," says a spokeswoman. "Our role as a charity is to try and change

this, and make physical activity an integral part of women's lives. We've had particular success with swimming, because it's so sociable."

Positive Futures, a Home Office-funded, activity-based inclusion programme for those aged 10 to 19, reports that swimming has also helped to engage girls from Muslim communities in physical activity. "In the past, the project struggled to engage with Muslim girls or find activities that attracted their interest. Single-sex swimming was introduced in the Gloucester area in a way that honoured their cultural traditions, including blinds at the window, same-sex lifeguards and without public spectators or CCTV," says Tom Sackville, the director of delivery and development.

"The young women were made to feel safe and comfortable, and, as a result, the word has spread and young women come far to join every weekend now. Some have qualified as lifeguards, swimming helpers or assistant swimming instructors."

Cathie Greasley, from south-east London, advocates becoming a swimming instructor as a great way to pass on your own skills in the water. "I teach children aged eight to 14, and it's great fun because there are no strict rules involved in swimming. They get enormous

satisfaction just from jumping in and collecting weighted objects off the bottom of the pool. Then there's relays and egg-and-spoon races. All the time they're doing these things, they're learning, and you can easily mix it in with the more serious stuff. Watching them learn, grow in confidence and really enjoy themselves is incredibly satisfying."

People assume you have to be a fantastic swimmer to teach, but Greasley disagrees. "I have a friend who only learned to swim properly in recent years, and she is in fact at an advantage because she relates to not knowing how to do it."

Nor should you assume that having health problems or existing injuries rules you out from swimming. Far from it, as the buoyancy and hydrostatic pressure of the water is brilliant for those with joint problems or those who are returning to exercise after an illness or injury. Swimming can reduce back pain or oedema in pregnancy and can help with respiratory problems too. "One of the reasons I learned to swim was because I was diagnosed with asthma as a child, and the doctor said anything that would strengthen my lungs would be good," says Pickering. "It improved the quality of my life almost instantly, and continues to today."

'It makes for great family bonding'

Julie Freeland regularly goes swimming with her husband, Mike, and their five children.

"I've always said my kids can pick and choose whatever sports they want, but they'll all have to learn to swim. I wanted them to have ultimate confidence in the water, and to have a chance to enjoy it as a child. Both have happened."

I opted for Water Babies to give them a good grounding. You can go to other groups and pretend to join in or think about the shopping, but with Water Babies it is truly baby-focused as you're face-to-face with them in the



water. After about a year, I put them through traditional swimming lessons, and we also go about once a week as a family. We all love it, and it feels a natural way to have fun and keep fit at the same time.

It's also the one sport my children can do together. My three-year-old has arm bands, but can play with her older brothers, even the one aged seven, almost to the same level. That makes for great bonding."