



It's the perfect time of year to immerse in the many benefits of swimming

'Swimming is a very meditative form of exercise,' notes a WVU exercise physiology professor



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Cutting through the chlorinated water in the newly renovated Kingsley Association pool this past April, I felt a sense of invigoration and bliss I hadn't felt in years.

As a San Diego native, the water was my home; the pool, my happy place. My first-ever job, at age 16, was at a waterpark. I was on the swim team throughout high school, and I taught swim lessons for four years at the YMCA. When lockdowns happened in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was laid off from that job, and my habit of lap swimming for exercise dropped off for many years following.

It wasn't until East Liberty community center The Kingsley Association

renovated its pool in April that I returned to the sport with consistency.

I'm not the only one who has reaped the benefits of swimming. Thousands may experience similar joy throughout summer, as [CitiParks announced the openings of 16 Allegheny County pools on June 16](#), in addition to [four county wave pools and spray parks](#), which opened June 9.

Swimming, while being a low-impact form of exercise, carries a multitude of health benefits.

Cardiovascular benefits

A form of aerobic exercise, swimming increases the oxygen demand of the body as it adapts to meet those demands.

As we exercise, the heart beats faster and we breathe harder, pumping more blood to the muscles as they exert more energy. Over time, this can lead to more oxygen and blood availability for the heart and a more resilient body.

“The small stress associated with exercise is a very good thing for our bodies,” said Maureen Walsh, an assistant professor in the Exercise Science Department at Slippery Rock University. “Our cells adapt to be more resistant and more resilient when the stressors of aging come into play.”

Swimming is unique in that the force of the water creates an added level of resistance against the muscles without the same impact the joints and muscles might experience from an on-land activity like running.

“The lack of gravity decreases the amount of work the body has to do to push blood back to the heart,” said Lori Sherlock, professor in exercise physiology and aquatic therapy coordinator at West Virginia University School of Medicine.

[One 2018 metaanalysis](#) of 29 studies, published in the journal Sports Medicine, found that swimming significantly improved oxygen uptake, cardiorespiratory fitness and body fat percentage in multiple populations, including those with asthma, healthy children and teens, compared to controls.

Muscle, joint and post-injury benefits

In February 2024, I was running in East Liberty and twisted my ankle on uneven pavement. That unfortunate fall led to a grade 3 ankle sprain that took nearly a year to heal.

I tried returning to running some months after but found it continued to exacerbate the pain and swelling. Even during a hike, I'd feel the ache and twinge of the past injury.

This occurred until I started swimming again. After lap swimming just once a week for a month, I could hike for miles — through Cedar Creek Park in Westmoreland County or Ohiopyle State Park in Fayette County — without pain in my ankle.

There's science behind this. Water has hydrostatic pressure, explained Sherlock, which is the pressure a fluid exerts because of the force of gravity. This pressure creates both a low-impact form of exercise and light resistance training ideal for injury recovery.

"It's a tremendous amount of pressure, though we don't really feel it all that much," said Sherlock. "It helps push fluid and redistribute it, kind of like wearing a compression sock."

"With swimming, there is a buoyancy factor — the load on joints and muscles is going to be reduced," said Walsh. "It still allows people to increase the intensity of their activity."

A newer field called aquatic therapy aims to specifically address the mental and physical benefits of being in the water. As an aquatic therapist and longtime swimmer, Sherlock has seen this firsthand.

People are "able to do things in water they haven't been able to do in years," she said. "That is a true gift. In addition to being able to move more, you also see this freedom and the ability to build physical gains."

Mental well-being

Taking a water fitness class or swimming with a friend can provide social benefits compared to exercising alone. When the Kingsley pool reopened, a friend and I agreed to start attending on a designated weekday, despite her never having swam laps before. She recently ran the Pittsburgh Marathon, but swimming and running demand the body systems differently.

We chat and catch up while kicking down and back, and I've watched her improve physically, too, now being able to swim 50 yards without needing a break.

Swimming has also been shown to decrease mental health symptoms from depression and anxiety. [A 2022 review](#) of 18 studies found that aquatic exercise — even light water aerobics — improved mood and anxiety symptoms.

“Swimming is a very meditative form of exercise,” said Sherlock. “We’re taking away a lot of the senses. We’re muffling out a lot of the external environment, looking at the floor of the pool, where there’s not a lot of visual interest, and our sense of touch is being taken over.

We’re able to look inward, much like meditation.”

How to start

I’ve been lucky that I have decades of experience being in and around water, as well as knowledge about water safety from years of lifeguarding and teaching swim lessons.

Without that knowledge, the water can be a daunting frontier.

Don’t underestimate the benefits of vertical swimming, said Sherlock.

“Water walking is an unsung hero,” she said. “It’s great for people with knee, hip, back, ankle and foot issues. It’s awesome for building muscular endurance and cardiovascular strength. It seems like such a simple activity, but it really has a lot of powerful benefits.”

For people with little water experience or a lot of fear, Sherlock starts them in waist-deep water or near a wall, allowing them to adapt to a new environment. Whether a person eventually gets horizontal is less important than the benefits water can yield overall, she said.

The city of Pittsburgh offers swim lessons at a variety of locations, including The Kingsley Association and multiple YMCAs. The American Red Cross also offers [a free, online course](#) on water safety.

City pools offer lap swim at designated times on both weekdays and

weekends for those who want more intense exercise.

But even if you simply get to one of the 16 city pools (with sunscreen on) this summer, the vitamin D and the cool water will surely improve your mood.

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