

Research Insight Report: Safety and wellbeing. Fiona Moffatt and Suzanne McGowan

Background to the project

A recent surge in popularity of wild swimming or swimming in natural 'blue spaces', including rivers, lakes, or the sea, has highlighted opportunities to leverage the use of blue spaces as community assets to combat health inequalities.

This project addresses the current lack of integrated information about the mental and physical health benefits of wild swimming alongside the risks related to water quality and safety aspects of specific blue spaces that people use for swimming.

One aspect of this project is harnessing community input on the benefits of, and barriers to, wild swimming. This report outlines insights gathered from the wild swimming community on the benefits and barriers to wild swimming that they have identified in their work and lived experience.

Findings from this strand of the project are drawn from three main sources from the wild swimming community

- Information from a Public Engagement Group
- Data collated from Facebook groups
- Interviews with Richmond group members

Initial feedback from our Public Engagement Group (PEG)

- All six members of our PEG were generally aware that health benefits of wild swimming existed, but there was significant uncertainty of what these might be.
- On safety, PEG members expressed concern over invisible risks. They discussed the potential for illness, safety, and water contamination. Other barriers they identified included wild swimming not being a lone activity, inclement weather and feeling too cold.
- For information on wild swimming, PEG members use Google, apps, YouTube, local community groups, and the Environmental Agency. Other sources for safety information are listed on page 4.













Water quality as a barrier to wild swimming

Surveys of 4500 outdoor swimmers conducted by *Outdoor Swimmer* magazine indicate that 19.1% of people in England said that worries about pollution and water quality prevented them from swimming, higher than any other country or region.^[1]

Only 9.9% said that water quality was not a concern. This indicates a significant change since the previous year's survey in 2021 when around 12% of people said worries about pollution stopped them swimming, but 40% said it never prevented them from swimming.

Our PEG (swimmers and non-swimmers) made unsolicited comments on media publicity on water quality leading to concern about the health impacts.

They emphasised that there is untreated sewage going into the waters and there was uncertainty about what the health impacts of raw sewage could be. They expressed concern about long-term health risks; one participant said they worry about being ill for a month if they get sick from the water and how that could affect their life. When asked how they would find out whether a site is safe, they indicated that they would carry out a Google search.

Our PEG had limited knowledge of designated swim sites and there was a lack of knowledge on how to check for information and water safety.

Observational discussions with *Swim the Lakes* revealed that it is usual for swimmers to check water for cloudiness and unusual smells and to be especially vigilant after heavy rain.

Enabling swimmers to be informed about water quality

Due to the lack of regular monitoring outside of designated sites, we looked at ways that swimmers might be able to self-test for water quality issues at sites that are not designated. There is currently no quick, inexpensive, and accurate way for swimmers to test the water prior to them swimming to assess algal toxins and harmful bacteria levels.

1 Algal bloom monitoring

The Bloomin' Algae app is easily accessible and there is good information on the Open Water Swimming Society website. Swimmers are being asked to trial the app.

Test kits for bacteria / coliforms

Commercially available simple test kits for bacterial water testing are designed for chlorinated pools so the limits are likely to be too sensitive in a natural setting. Suitable scientific test kits are difficult to use without training. We are asking swimmers to trial the kits to establish whether they can get useful results.

While there is good provision of water quality information for designated bathing waters, little systematic monitoring exists for non-designated waters meaning that no information for swimmers exists for many water bodies.

Most designated bathing waters are from coastal sites, so there is lack of water quality information for inland waters (which tend to have more water quality issues).

Water quality is a concern for swimmers and potential swimmers and recent media coverage has raised awareness and concerns around this issue.

There is some good existing information available on websites to allow swimmers to assess risks on water quality (through assessing visual evidence, being aware of sewage inputs and considering how rainfall conditions might affect pollution inputs).

Water safety as a barrier to wild swimming

- Interviews with National Governing Body (NGB) members indicate that one of the primary concerns for the public and all other stakeholders is safety.
- Though loss of lifeguarded sites is problematic, death by drowning in wild swimming is rare, and usually related to a medical condition or swim failure.
- There is recognition that the wild swimming community is dominated by middle aged women who tend to exhibit less risky behaviours and generally are more risk aware.
- One commonly discussed issue is dipping versus swimming. Our PEG viewed 'wild dipping' more favourably than wild swimming; this may be safety related.
- A critical source of information for wild swimming (currently) is informal Google and social media. Generally, the safety advice on social media is deemed to be of good quality.
- Wild swimmers are ideally placed to disseminate water safety information amongst friendship groups but it would be beneficial to have a central point for information.

Evaluating the risks of poor bathing water quality

The great majority of UK bathing waters are coastal sites, with fewer lakes and very few rivers. The UK environment agencies give regularly updated water quality monitoring data for coliforms, cocci bacteria, viruses, and algae at designated bathing water sites throughout the swim season, which are classified as 'Excellent', 'Good', 'Sufficient' or 'Poor'.

England	Wales
Environment Agency 426 designated bathing waters ^[2]	Environment Agency 107 bathing waters ^[3]
Scotland Scottish Environmental Protection Agency 87 bathing waters ^[4]	Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) 28 bathing waters ^[5]

If a Bathing Water is classified as 'poor', an 'advice against bathing' symbol must be put up on site and online, along with information about pollution sources and the action being taken to clean it up. This information is available for designated bathing waters only.

Existing information sources for wild swimmers

Outdoor Swimming Society

A good variety of information on risk assessment for swimmers including information on water quality ^[6] and water safety.^[7] There are more in-depth sections on:

- Algal blooms ^[8]
- Weil's disease ^[9]
- Assessing pollution risks associated with rainy weather ^[10]

The Rivers Trust

The Rivers Trust provides some useful information explaining issues of sewage contamination.^[11]

An interactive map - Is my river fit to play in? - provides information on where sewage outfalls enter water bodies in England (sewage storm overflows, treated effluent discharge points).^[12]

Other Advice and Information

- National Water Safety: nationalwatersafety.org.uk/advice-and-information/open-water-swimming
- The Royal Life Saving Society UK water safety tips: rlss.org.uk/pages/category/open-water-safety-tips
- The Royal Life Saving Society UK self-assessed water safety toolkit: rlss.org.uk/take-the-toolkit
- Swim England how to stay safe: swimming.org/openwater/how-to-stay-safe/
- NOWCA safety guide: nowca.org/cold-water-swimming-a-safety-guide/
- Canal River Trust safety information: canalrivertrust.org.uk/enjoy-the-waterways/safety-on-ourwaterways/open-water-swimming
- The River Trust safety routine: theriverstrust.org/about-us/news/river-safety-routine-2
- Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service: rbfrs.co.uk/your-safety/out-and-about/water-safety/
- Royal National Lifeboat Institution: rnli.org/safety/know-the-risks/cold-water-shock
- Royal National Lifeboat Institution: rnli.org/safety/choose-your-activity/open-water-swimming

References

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