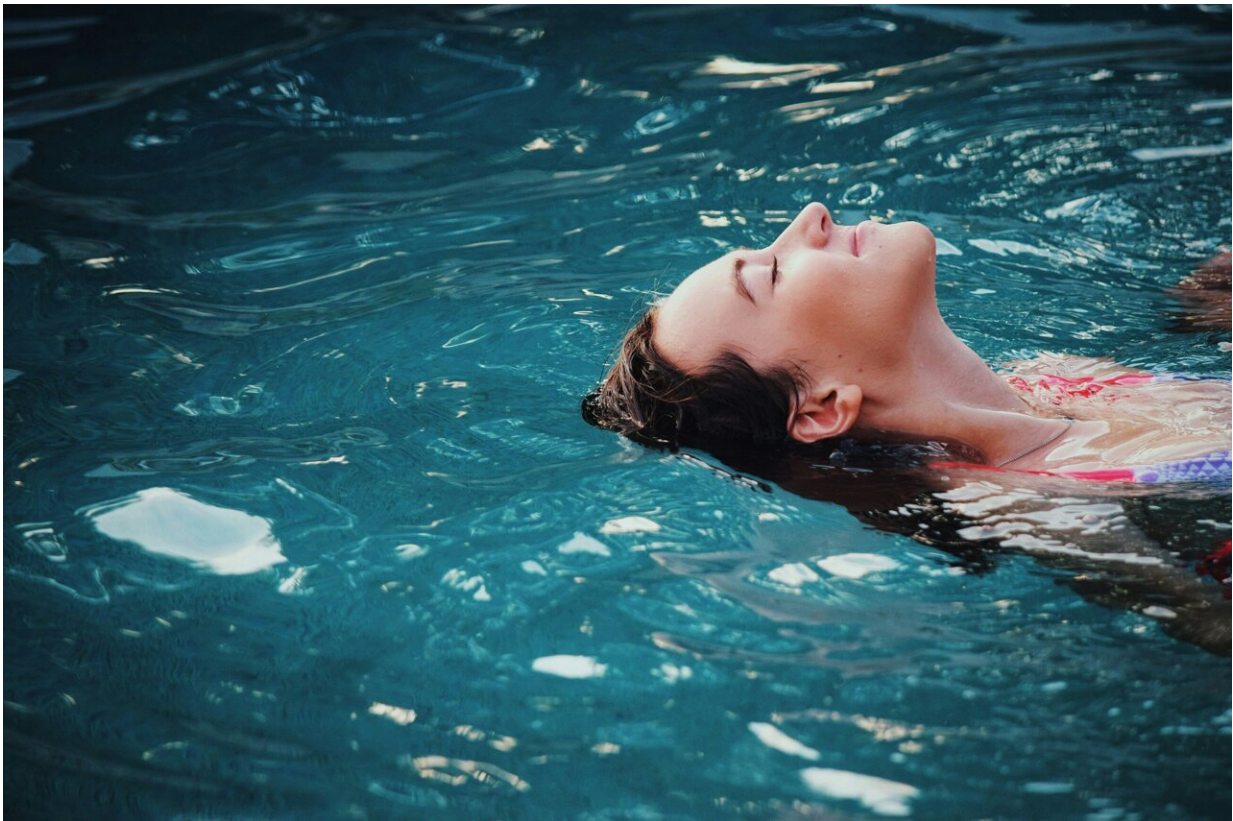


Calls for cold water swimming to be made safer for women

August 21 2024



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Cold water swimming is growing in popularity among women, but more support is needed to make many wild swimming sites in the UK safer and more accessible, finds a new study led by UCL researchers.

The research, published in *Women's Health*, explored the habits of women who enjoy cold water swimming and was carried out in collaboration with researchers from the University of Portsmouth, University of Sussex, University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust, University of Plymouth and Bournemouth University.

The team surveyed 1,114 women in the UK aged 16 to 80 years old in 2022 and found that most women who participated in wild swimming usually did so in the sea (64.4%) and the majority (89%) swam all year around.

The women surveyed stated that they swam for longer in the summer, with the most common length of time being 30–60 minutes (48.2%). However, in the winter, a majority of swims lasted between 5–15 minutes (53.8%).

Earlier this year, the same survey revealed that menopausal women who regularly [swim in cold water](#) report significant improvements to their physical and mental symptoms. It was also found to improve menstrual symptoms.

However, while there are many benefits to the sport, there are also risks that can be exacerbated by the swimming environment.

Lead author, Professor Joyce Harper (UCL EGA Institute for Women's Health) said, "One of the [health risks](#) linked to cold water swimming is the increased likelihood of gastroenteritis and other infections due to pollution in UK rivers and seas. This could be avoidable with better monitoring of sites."

Co-author Dr. Mark Harper (University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust) added, "Barriers to cold water swimming can be overcome and our early research in non-pregnant populations suggests

that the activity has a significantly positive effect on mental health."

Designated bathing waters in the UK are typically monitored during the [summer months](#) (May-September). However, many do not meet the prescribed standards and researchers believe this may be worse for undesignated sites.

As a result, the researchers are calling for the UK government, water companies, the Environment Agency, and others across the world, to improve the safety and accessibility of open water for people who like to swim outdoors.

Professor Harper said, "Our previous research has found that women strongly perceive cold water swimming to benefit their health. Exercising in nature, with a community, is a combination that should be encouraged. However, it is currently not well supported.

"For example, in the UK, the government bathing-water quality website only runs from May to September, ignoring the winter months where heavy rainfall and consequent sewage overflow most commonly occur.

"Globally, we should be ensuring that cold water swimming is accessible and safe. It is time to make this increasingly popular and beneficial sport more secure and supported for all."

Co-author Professor Sasha Roseneil (University of Sussex) said, "In recent years cold water swimming has become a passion for many thousands of women across the UK, bringing numerous benefits to well-being. While the free and unregulated nature of swimming in open water is part of its attraction, it is time for the government and regulators to pay serious attention to the quality of our rivers, lakes and seas, to protect both swimmers today, and the ecosystems of these precious natural resources for the future."

The team are continuing their research into the topic and are involved in an upcoming study led by Professor Jill Shawe (University of Plymouth) into [cold water](#) swimming and pregnancy.

More information: The swimming habits of women who cold water swim, *Womens Health* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/17455057241265080](https://doi.org/10.1177/17455057241265080)

Provided by University College London

Citation: Calls for cold water swimming to be made safer for women (2024, August 21) retrieved 3 September 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-08-cold-safer-women.html>

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