

Safety guidance validated: Inexperienced swimmers can 'float to live' in open water conditions

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New research offers hope in reducing the number of drowning incidents worldwide, after putting the latest safety guidance to the test.

A team at the University of Portsmouth's Extreme Environments Laboratory (EEL) have confirmed the Royal National Lifeboat Institution's (RNLI) "Float to Live" messaging is effective at helping inexperienced people survive in realistic open water conditions.

Participants in two studies successfully applied the techniques in different water scenarios, including still and moving [fresh water](#), sea water, and even while clothed, which mimics real-life accidental falls into water.

Professor Mike Tipton MBE, co-founder of the University's EEL, said, "Simple, actionable advice can make a substantial difference in [survival rates](#) for inexperienced swimmers and experienced swimmers overcome by the conditions. By improving floating competence and confidence, we can also better equip people to handle unexpected immersion in water."

In Study 1, a total of 25 participants undertook four floats in still open water (fresh or sea water). In Study 2, 23 participants undertook three floats in an indoor swimming flume.

The volunteers were not experienced water users and only 32% were confident in their ability to float prior to taking part.

The team assessed the effect of the RNLI advice on floating competence, confidence and difficulty, and then compared it to a float with no guidance.

The results showed following the "Float to Live" instructions

significantly improved participants' ability to float, even in less controlled and more challenging open water environments, such as lakes and seas.

The research, [published](#) in *BMC Public Health*, also found personalized coaching further enhanced floating skills. Simple tips like "tilt your head back with ears submerged," "relax and move your hands gently," and "it is OK if your legs sink" were particularly beneficial.

Dr. Clare Eglin, from the Extreme Environments Laboratory, said, "We found that both practice and coaching improved floating ability, but the majority of participants said they preferred coaching first as this increased their confidence more quickly. This is an important finding, as not everyone can afford or commit to personalized coaching and the floating skills practiced in a pool are transferable to open water."

There are an estimated 236,000 annual drowning deaths worldwide (World Health Organization, 2023). In the UK, around 400 people accidentally drown each year, which equates to one person dying every 20 hours, and around half never intended to enter the water.

About 60% of people who die on immersion in cold water do so in the first minutes due to cold shock. The risk is further increased if the individual thrashes about or attempts to swim at this time.

As a result, the RNLI, in collaboration with the University of Portsmouth, developed the "Float To Live" water safety message. Underpinned by EEL's research findings, the campaign has successfully increased public understanding of the importance of floating as a primary survival behavior in water-related emergencies and has been reproduced internationally.

The charity has already begun integrating the new study's findings into

its campaign, adding new visuals and instructions to make the message even more effective.

Gareth Morrison, RNLI Head of Water Safety, said, "We are delighted that this new research has confirmed that our 'Float to Live' message is effective at helping inexperienced people survive in realistic open water conditions. Our collaboration with the University of Portsmouth has been key to finding the most effective way to communicate the advice and we're pleased that it is so successful. We know that following this simple advice can make a lifesaving difference."

More information: Clare Eglin et al, Inexperienced water users can "Float to Live" in realistic open water conditions, *BMC Public Health* (2024). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-024-19409-6](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-19409-6)

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