

Swim England

Things to consider before swimming with a health condition

A quick reference for supporting swimmers

Things to consider before swimming with a health condition

For most people with a long term health condition or impairment, swimming and aquatic activity is excellent for health. It is safer to be active than to be inactive.

But there are some things that might need advance consideration with specific health conditions or impairments to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience.

This resource has been developed as an additional prompt, identifying some of the crucial considerations in addition to those outlined in our Swimming and Health Fact Sheets and Swimming Teacher Guidance on Health Conditions resources.

To accompany this resource Swim England have also produced a **handout for members of the public** and a **series of three posters** which can be displayed as prompts in any pool facility.

Swim England have also developed fact sheets around some of the conditions contained in this document, with more hints and tips about swimming with specific conditions that you can signpost customers to: swimming.org/justswim/get-healthier/swimming-with-health-conditions/

As a professional:

- Please be calm and kind. For most conditions, today's experience may support better health for the rest of their life. Remember that living with a health condition can be frustrating, which can sometimes make people irritable. Remaining calm and professional, and acknowledging that you see their point of view, can help prevent conflict.
- It may feel 'unfair' to spend a lot of time with one person, but your support is about ensuring equity, not equality. Each organisation has a legal obligation to ensure facilities and services are available to everyone where reasonably possible.
- Pools should carry out environmental assessments, identify barriers and remove them e.g. clear labelling of toilets and changing rooms.
- Staff should ask how they can help individuals in a way that suits them. For example, someone may use a wheelchair to travel but can walk some steps, so the use of a hoist or lift system should be offered in a neutral way.
- When talking about toilets or changing areas it is more inclusive to have a habit of saying: "the ladies' is this way, the mens' is there and the accessible changing or toilet is here" when asked. This avoids seeming awkward with transgender people, those whose gender is unclear or people with invisible disabilities.

Some of the information below will be useful for you to know and explain to customers before or during their visit to the pool facility.

Considerations before swimming for certain health conditions to reduce harm or distress

Conditions to consider	Things staff or swimmers might need to consider in advance
Cancer (during or after treatment)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water is treated and there should be strict cleaning regimes in place – so infection risk is low but individuals should check with their cancer treatment team on their risk of infection before swimming.
An open wound	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is best to wait three weeks to heal after an operation and apply a waterproof dressing at home as humidity around pools can make dressings harder to stick. Not all wounds need be covered in the water so it is best for individuals to speak to a healthcare professional beforehand. Management of pool chemicals should be carefully managed if individuals with wounds are likely to enter the pool.
A stoma or colostomy bag	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals should wear a plug for a stoma or waterproof seal for a bag and apply a new bag before swimming.
Incontinence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals should get properly fitting incontinence swim wear with inner leg cuffs – normal incontinence pants or pads are not suitable for water. Encourage customers to use the toilet before getting in the water.
Poor kidney function	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> People may experience increased urine production in water and more frequent toilet trips may be needed during a swim or session. Signage should be clear from the pool to toilets so that individuals can plan their exit. Individuals should wait for at least one hour after eating a big meal before swimming.
Peripheral oedema (leg swelling) due to heart, lung, kidney or mobility problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The hydrostatic pressure of water can help this if there are no signs of breathlessness when lying flat. Individuals should consider staying in shallow water to start with if breathless when standing or on exertion.
Hearing impairments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your facility should consider how giving visual warnings can help those with hearing impairments e.g. a session ends or a wave machine is about to be turned on.
Mental Health problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Always be positive if a customer asks for support with something. Those planning a visit could consider visiting with a friend before attending, to get to know staff at the venue, identify any barriers or practical details, such as coins for lockers, etc.
Invisible disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be approachable and observant – people may be nervous to ask for help. Try to consider how any request can be supported and consult with facility management if this proves difficult and might need to be accommodated within policies or procedures.

Specific safety considerations before swimming

Condition:	What should be considered in advance	How this might help swimmers	Items to bring to the poolside (not kept in a locker)	What action should be taken in an emergency?
Diabetes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If blood sugar 'low normal' (4-7 mmol/litre) individuals should consider having a pre-swim snack. Poolside staff should be informed if an individual knows they are at risk of having a hypo. 	Avoid low blood sugar (often called a 'hypo').	Hypo treatments e.g. glucose tablets or gels.	Individuals should self-administer hypo treatments to increase blood sugar.
Angina (chest pain)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals should not swim if they experience chest pain before or after they arrive. 	Avoid further pain caused by arteries to the heart constricting* and preventing blood flow/could prevent a heart attack.	GTN spray or tablets. GTN patches can also be worn in the pool, but a spare patch should be brought and applied if the existing patch falls off.	Individuals should self-administer GTN spray as prescribed to open up the arteries to heart.
Asthma / other Respiratory conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals should not swim just after an asthma attack. They should make sure they take any regular medications before they swim. 	Prevent airway tubes constricting causing extreme breathlessness.	Emergency inhalers.	Individuals should self-administer inhaler medication to open airways.
Epilepsy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poolside staff should be informed if an individual may be at risk of a seizure. 	Allows staff to be prepared if a seizure occurs.	Individuals should consider wearing a medic alert ID or perhaps a colour contrasted swim cap to help identify them to lifeguards.	Staff should be trained how to deal with seizures. If in the pool they should hold the person's head above water until the seizure stops.

*constricting = a tube squeezing down, so the tube is too narrow and it is harder for stuff to get through.

Practical suggestions before you swim to reduce slips, trips, falls, distress or anxiety

Additional support needs	Before they go on poolside	What they might need with them on poolside
Visual impairments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They should be encouraged to ask for staff assistance if needed. 	Spectacles or mobility cane.
Limited mobility or balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They should be encouraged to ask staff to assist where needed, in particular asking about entry and exit hoist or lift systems. 	Walking stick, frame or poolside footwear. Facility owned multi-point walking aids are advisable to avoid outdoor walking aids being used. Single point walking sticks are less likely to prevent falls on poolside. Poolside footwear may be used but it is advisable that this is not outdoor footwear.
A need to cover their body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They should be made aware of clothing policies before arrival, in particular what types of clothing are acceptable/safest in the pool. 	Dressing gown, rash vest or other light-weight coverings.
Dementia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage individuals to visit the facility with someone to help identify barriers or potential causes of distress. Encourage them to ask staff to support them with any issues on arrival. 	Simple directions may help them to navigate around the facility. Ensure policies are supportive of those who wish to bring a friend or carer to support them.

