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Beating the Heat with a Swim

By: Bev Hillman

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The dog days of summer are here! What better time to take your workout to the local pool. With the temperatures hitting the low 30's and the heat and humidity dragging you down, there's nothing more refreshing and energizing than gliding through the cool water.

Swimming is often praised as an ideal exercise - and for good reason. It makes the heart and lungs work more efficiently, enhances muscle strength and endurance, improves flexibility, and helps reduce stress. Yet it is easy on the joints. Swimming uses more muscles than nearly any other exercise, except perhaps cross-country skiing and is a good way to burn calories.

The trick to keeping swimming interesting is to mix up your workouts with an assortment of gadgets and a whole range of speeds. Variety is what transforms lap swimming from forced labour to bona fide fun. You can use swim fins and a kickboard to improve your leg strength, and paddles and a pully-buoy to challenge your upper body. The routines designed by coach Kerry O'Brien of the Walnut Creek Master's swim club of Northern California are the perfect cross-training alternative for runners, cyclists and aerobicizers alike.

To get the most out of lap swimming, go into every workout with a specific goal. "Have an idea of what you're trying to achieve that day," says O'Brien. Do you want to loosen up from a hard run or weight-lifting session? Or do you want a killer aerobic workout? Do you want to work on speed or endurance?

In order to achieve any of these goals, you need to understand the basic components of a swim workout. Then you have the ability to tailor your workouts to your specific needs - and to make swimming a heckuva lot more fun. No two swim workouts need ever be the same. Be creative and really mix things up.

Swim workouts typically consist of parts, or sets, divided by rest periods of a few minutes. There's no law dictating how many sets a swim workout should include.

Warm-up - Swim at an easy pace, getting a feel for the water. Include all the strokes you plan to use in your workout. The longer you workout, the longer your warm-up should be. In general, the warm-up should be 10 to 20 percent of your total metres.

Warm-up set - This is a short, transitional set done at an easy to moderate pace - faster than the warm-up but not as intense as your main set. Fins are a great tool for a warm-up set.

Main set - This is the longest, most intense part of your workout. There are no rules here. Some days you may want to focus on endurance, others on sprinting. You might use paddles to emphasize your upper body or fins to work on your leg strength. The main set should be 60 to 75 percent of your total metres.

Mop-up set - The purpose of this brief set is to reinforce the good habits and techniques you focused on during your main set. The tendency after a tough main set is to get sloppy. Do this set at the easy-to-moderate pace of your warm-up set.

Cool-down - This is your victory lap, your pat on the back. It's simply the time to reaffirm that you've done a good job while bringing your heart rate back down. Fifty to 100 metres will suffice.

Intervals - During a typical swim workout, some sets consist of uninterrupted swimming; for instance, to boost your endurance, you might swim 300 metres without stopping. Other sets are broken up into intervals: To up your speed, for example, you might swim 50 high-intensity metres, then rest 10 seconds, then swim another 50 metres and rest 10 seconds, and so on until you complete a total of six repetitions. On paper, a set like this will be designated as "6 x 50 metres, : 10 rest."

Once you're in decent swimming shape, you may want to try another type of interval: Instead of taking a pre-determined amount of rest, allot yourself a certain amount of time in which to complete the swim and the rest. For instance, you might swim six repetitions of 50 metres on a 1 -minute interval; every time 1 minute is up, you begin another 50 metres. If you complete the 50 metres in 50 seconds, you get to rest 10 seconds before leaving again. If it takes you 56 seconds to swim the 50 metres, then you get to rest only 4 seconds. This type of set keeps you motivated. You get rewarded for hard work with more rest. It may take some trial and error to figure out the interval lengths that work for you.

Putting it all together - Here are some sets you can incorporate into any workout you design. You can make these sets harder to easier by varying your pace or the amount of rest you take between intervals.

The pyramid: You swim 50 metres (then rest), the 100 metres, then 150 metres, then 200 metres (or as high as you want to go). Then go back down giving you 800 metres. Or you can simply go up the ladder. You decide how long to rest between intervals.

The shotgun: You swim one distance, say 400 metres. Then you divide that distance in two and swim it twice - two repetitions of 200. Then you divide it again, swimming four repetitions of 100. Finally you divide it once again, swimming 8 repetitions of 50. This would give you a total of 1,600 metres, close to a mile. You might cut your rest in half as you cut your swims in half.

The Indy 500: Pick a distance that you're not yet able to swim continuously, say 500 metres. Take a rest whenever you need, and keep track of how many seconds you rest throughout the entire 500 metres. Each time you do this drill, aim to reduce the number of seconds you rest, until you can swim the entire 500 continuously.

The clock chaser: Swim five repetitions of 100 yards, reducing the length of your interval each time. Start at an interval that's easy for you - say, 2:30 for your first 100 metres. Then, drop down to 2:25, then to 2:20, then to 2:15. This forces you to pick up the pace; otherwise you won't get any rest between sets.

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