

Swimming May Slow Down Aging By Decades

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From cradle to grave, swimming might just be the best exercise ever. Here, eight health benefits of taking a lap or two.

Swimming is good for just about everyone. It accommodates all ages, stages, abilities and disabilities.

There's also evidence it can slow down the aging process.

A long-term study at Indiana University Bloomington's Councilman Center for the Science of Swimming found that Masters Swimmers (over age 35) who swam roughly 3,200 to 4,500 meters (about 3.2 to 4.8 kilometers) three to five times a week, postponed the aging process. And not just for a few years but for decades, according to traditional age markers like muscle mass blood pressure and lung function.

But you don't have to be a Masters Swimmer to benefit from swimming. Far from it.

"The health and well-being benefits start with a minimal amount of swimming," Councilman Centre Director Joel Stager is quoted as saying in the university's newsletter. "If you want the fitness effect, you'll need to look at getting your heart rate up and boosting the intensity."

Another study, by Dr. Steven Blair at the University of South Carolina, has shown swimming dramatically reduces the risk of dying. The study spanned 32 years and followed 40,000 men, aged 20 to 90. Those who swam had a 50 per cent lower death rate than runners, walkers and those who didn't exercise at all.

Here are some other known benefits to swimming:

1. It's kind to your joints and improves flexibility: "Swimming is a form of exercise that's suitable to people of all ages because it's so easy on the joints," says Belgium-based Christophe Keller, who so loves the sport he created a website

solely devoted to it, called enjoy-swimming.com. “The water supports the body so only a fraction of your weight has to be supported by your limbs. It also favors smooth circular movements rather than quick jerky movements that can strain joints.”

2. Helps you lose weight: Swimming for half an hour can burn as much as 250 calories. Even a gentle swim can burn 200 calories. Since water is about 800 times denser than air, your body has to work harder in the pool, even though it might not feel like it is. Gliding through the water can be a glorious feeling.

3. Improves mental health: The British website swimming.org reports that swimming promotes feelings of well being, something the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention confirms. “For people with fibromyalgia [who frequently experience anxiety and depression] it can decrease anxiety, and exercise therapy in warm water can decrease depression and improve mood.”

4. It’s a great aerobic exercise: Swimming increases your lung capacity and gives them a solid work-out. It’s also been identified as a good form of exercise for people with asthma.

5. Choose where you want to tone up: Since swimming involves a variety of strokes that use different muscles, you can target the areas you most want to tone – be it legs, upper arms, or stomach muscles. Keller’s website includes [techniques for doing each stroke](#).

6. It’s cheap: Unlike some sports which require a lot of equipment, swimming just requires a swim suit, bathing cap and a pair of decent goggles and of course a pool, which most cities and mid-size communities have. It’s also a great summer exercise since you can cool down and work out at the same time.

7. Suitable for all ages: That’s why they say swimming is ‘cradle to grave.’ You simply adjust the pace to your age and ability.

8. It’s social: “If you swim regularly you’ll most likely make new friends of all ages,” says Keller, “since people not only swim at the pool but also like to relax, socialize and talk. My impression is that swimmers are usually positive and in a good mood.”

If you aren’t already a swimmer, but think you might like to start, first check with your doctor to make sure there aren’t any health issues to take into account. You might even want to enroll in swim lessons. An instructor can not only help build swimming skills, but alleviate any fears you might have about the water.