

Swimming: Stay afloat for better health

By Natalie McGill

Activities such as biking, running and walking can be great sources of physical fitness. But if you're looking for an activity that is not only a great source of exercise but accessible to people of all abilities, look no further than your community pool.

When done safely, swimming can be an excellent source of aerobic fitness for people of all ages and physical abilities, says Kathe Briggs, MS, an American College of Sports Medicine-certified clinical exercise physiologist.

"Swimming is a very popular sport activity in the United States," Briggs says. "It has a multitude of benefits. It's a low-impact activity. It improves cardiovascular fitness. It improves your muscular strength and endurance."

Swimming allows you to exercise your upper and lower body in a wide range of motion and can be gentler on your joints compared with other modes of fitness, Briggs says. Aside from fitness, swimming is also a good source of physical therapy, particularly for people who may have musculoskeletal health issues such as arthritis and women who are pregnant, she says.

"People with rheumatoid arthritis have great health improvements using water as their mode of physical activity," Briggs says. "When you are pregnant and carrying around the extra weight of a baby, getting in the water and letting the buoyancy of the water lift the fetus is really, really wonderful."

Physical health isn't the only benefit of swimming. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, water-based exercise such as swimming can have positive effects on mental health, such as strengthening family bonds between children with developmental disabilities and their parents.

"There's a lot of research that shows

improved mood," Briggs says. "There's even some research that's coming out showing the positive impact of physical activity on Alzheimer's and some of the aging issues that are going on in our society right now."

If you're considering swimming for fitness or for therapy, talk to your health care provider about developing a plan to get the most out of your time in the water. Research the closest indoor and outdoor pools near you, which may be at a recreation or fitness center, Briggs says. And ask if there is staff available to teach you certain swim styles or offer classes.

When you begin a swimming routine, aim to swim for at least 150 minutes per week to get the most benefits, Briggs says.

"You can break that out any way that works for you and your schedule," Briggs says. "A lot of times you'll hear 30 minutes a day, five days a week. It boils down to two and a half hours a week."

Swimming is also a benefit to many people with disabilities, who may find it easier to move in the water than they do on land. Your buoyancy may even allow you to move joints that are typically frozen, Briggs says.

"Those joints become unloaded and they can sometimes be moved or you can move them yourself," Briggs says. "You can really improve flexibility and range of motion in the water."

There are a variety of swim styles to choose from to get the most benefits from your water



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time. Briggs says there are four basic swimming strokes: freestyle, backstroke, breaststroke and butterfly.

The most common type of swimming stroke is freestyle, also called the crawl, where you lay on your stomach in the water and move your arms and flutter kick your legs while turning your head to the side to breathe.

The backstroke is similar to freestyle except you move your arms and legs while swimming on your back. The breaststroke involves using a frog-type kick and coming up for a breath with every stroke you do in the water. The butterfly, which Briggs says is the hardest stroke,

involves moving both arms at the same time over the top of the water with a dolphin kick.

Whatever stroke you choose to practice while in the water, they all come with health benefits.



Follow swim safety first

If you've never learned how to swim, look into whether your nearest recreation center offers adult or child beginner swimmer classes. But even if you're an experienced swimmer, Briggs says you should never swim alone or without the surveillance of a lifeguard. If you're more inexperienced, be sure to stay away from deeper waters.

"Swimming with a partner or a friend or someone else can keep you safe as well as help you to derive the most long-lasting health benefit from it," Briggs says.

Also before taking a dip, don't enter the pool dirtier than you leave it. CDC says to shower before swimming and never swim if you feel sick.



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