

SWIMMING FOR RSI

I first tried swimming shortly after getting RSI, at the insistence of my physio. I was never very good at swimming at school, and visited an outdoor 50m pool in the summer. I found coordinating my breathing difficult, and people in the other lanes were, compared to me, Olympic standard. I started to feel pressured to swim as fast as I could, which left me feeling exhausted and disheartened. Swimming made me sore, not better, and after a few weeks I gave it up all together.

My second attempt was about eight months later in a heated indoor 25m pool. I went during the day, when most people were either children or older, which put less pressure on my not-so-good swimming ability. I took it slow to begin with so I wouldn't overtire myself, resting at each end for several minutes before continuing. I took care to warm-up and stopped after only 100m, so as not to overtire myself. I continued this routine while off work, gradually improving over 12 months. Swimming became more enjoyable, and I felt better and less tight, especially in my neck area. The key to the success of my second attempt was relaxing.

-Natasha

Swimming is often recommended for the treatment of RSI and overuse injuries. Like all aerobic exercise, it improves blood circulation, which can be very important in healing damaged nerves and tendons. The value of swimming over walking or some sports is that it's a weightless activity, and that can make it a lot easier and more comfortable.. Lydia So, a reintegration therapist from the Netherlands, notes another benefit of swimming, "People relax more easily in water.

Furthermore, you can go at your own pace."

Majon van Eijsden, a specialist in rehabilitation, says that for swimming to be successful in helping RSI, posture is very important. "Most people bend their head too far back in relation to their torso, especially with freestyle or breaststroke." She therefore advises that people swim on their backs as, done smoothly, this is a less taxing stroke.

Taking it easy is easier said than done. When I was first advised to take up swimming, I could hardly swim at all. When you are in constant pain, you tend to avoid movement. Chronic inflammation of my shoulder made it impossible to move my arms. I persevered, using a neck-float so that I only had to use my legs. Initially I tried to swim at my old pace – I really suffered after that first time. So I would advise anyone to be satisfied with three laps at first. Intentionally swim in a relaxed and slow manner, and be creative – don't dismiss a therapy or activity if it does not work out immediately but seek a way to make it work for you.

-Sonja

The constant pain of many RSI sufferers can make gauging your limits difficult. Van Eijsden comments; "If it hurts, you have to slow down and modify your action. I always give my patients the following rule of thumb: within 2 hours time the pain should be back to its basic level. If not, then you went beyond your limits and should do less next time."

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However, training needs to be built up very gradually – even if you are not suffering from pain. If you don't take it easy swimming may worsen your condition, so it is important to treat it as a relaxing activity. You should not attempt to swim fast or for long periods until you are familiar with how your injury responds to more mild swimming exertion.

Ideas from our members:

- ✦ Normal swimming uses mostly upper-body muscles. Try using flippers to take some strain off your upper body.
- ✦ Switch between strokes, to evenly exercise all muscles and avoid putting strain on your neck. Try overarm, side-stroke, breast and backstroke, and walking.
- ✦ Rest between laps if you're tired
- ✦ Goggles and/or a snorkel help to keep your neck comfortable
- ✦ Be careful not to crane your neck back when doing breast-stroke and freestyle.
- ✦ Try walking in water – it's good exercise and the pressure of the water helps to open your chest.
- ✦ Your muscles relax much better in warm water – see if you can find a well-heated pool.
- ✦ Begin with a warm-up, such as walking up and down the pool, and end with a soak in the spa or a hot shower, to relax your muscles afterwards.
- ✦ Try doing most of the work with your legs and just moving your arms through the motions *without* pulling.

Opening your fingers also helps to reduce the strain on your arms.

By wearing a snorkel I don't have to turn my head to breathe. This means I'm not struggling to turn my head and not squashing my shoulder/neck muscles to get my head around. My swimming action is smoother, longer, my head is not bent, I can breathe and I suffer a great deal less pain. As far as swimming on my back, I find that my neck gets extremely tired and painful – so at the moment I'm trialling a neck-rest that floats.

Teresa

If you are not comfortable with swimming, or if even these precautions make you sore, try something less strenuous. Other exercises, such as simple walking or hydrotherapy, may be more appropriate for you, as each person's injury responds best to a different form of exercise. Remember that if swimming makes you sore for more than 2 hours, or if it's in anyway stressful or tiring, slow down, change your action and do less next time! Think of any exercise as rehabilitation, not fitness, and only do as much as you are comfortable with.



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