



TRIATHLETE GUIDE

Open Water Swimming: From Panic to Power

For most novice triathletes, the "black line" at the bottom of the pool is a security blanket. Removing that line, adding murky water, and introducing 200 other splashing athletes can trigger a "fight or flight" response. This guide is designed to help you domesticate your "lizard brain" and conquer the open water swim.

1. The "Lizard Brain" & The Mammalian Dive Reflex

When you put your face in cold, dark water, your body may experience a momentary spike in heart rate and a feeling of breathlessness. This isn't a lack of fitness; it's a physiological reflex.

- **The Fix:** Never start a race "cold." Always get in 10–15 minutes early. Splash cold water on your face and neck. Perform 10–20 rhythmic exhalations (blow bubbles) into the water to tell your nervous system you are safe.
- **Source:** [Psychological Stress and the Sport of Triathlon \(2024 Update\)](#)

2. Pool Drills for Open Water Success

You don't need a lake to train for the lake. You can build OWS skills in the controlled environment of a 25-yard pool.

- **Sighting (The "Tarzan" Drill):** Every 4th stroke, lift your eyes just above the water line (eyes only, like a crocodile) to look forward before turning your head to breathe. Put a water bottle at the end of the lane to give yourself a target.
- **The "Wall-less" Turn:** Stop touching the wall. Turn 2 yards before the wall to build the core strength and momentum required when there are no lanes.

- **Closed-Eye Swimming:** Swim 10 strokes with your eyes closed to see if you veer left or right. This identifies your natural "pull" so you can compensate on race day. It also gives you an indication of how often you need to sight in open water.

3. Wetsuit: Your Personal Life Vest

Novices often view the wetsuit as a restriction. Instead, view it as a performance-enhancing safety device.

- **Buoyancy:** Neoprene lifts your hips, making you more hydrodynamic and—crucially—allowing you to float effortlessly if you need to stop and compose yourself.
- **The "Fit" Tip:** A poorly fitted wetsuit causes "neck rub" and restriction. Ensure the suit is pulled high into the crotch and armpits to allow for full shoulder rotation. If you do experience chafing, use liberal amounts of BodyGlide in those areas.
- **Source:** [*The Effect of Neoprene Wetsuits on Swim Performance \(Journal of Sports Sciences, 2023\)*](#)

4. The "10-Stroke Rule" for Race Day

The "Washing Machine" (the chaotic mass start) is where most panic happens.

- **The Strategy:** Do not try to "win" the first 50 meters. Start on the outside or the back of your wave. Commit to **10 slow, deliberate strokes**. Focus only on the exhale. Once you hit stroke 11, your heart rate will stabilize, and you'll find your rhythm.
- **Navigation:** Don't blindly follow the person in front of you—they might be lost! Look for large, stationary landmarks (trees, houses, hills) beyond the turn buoys; they are much easier to see than a bobbing orange pyramid.
- **Current:** Before the race watch the safety kayaks to see which way they are drifting to get an approximation of the current. Aim slightly into the current for any cross current swim legs.
- **The 'Community' Factor:** If you see a fellow athlete panicking, give them a wide berth to avoid being grabbed. If you choose to help, approach from the side and encourage them to flip onto their back and focus on rhythmic breathing.

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Disclaimer: Consult with a physician before beginning any new exercise program. YTC is not responsible for any injuries incurred while following this guide.