

The
Outdoor
Swimming
Society

SWIMMING 5K TRAINING GUIDE

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Cover photography by [Niall Meehan](#)

Welcome to our Swim Couch to 5k seven week guide.

Are you a lapsed swimmer and would like to rebuild your fitness and confidence? Or signed-up to a swim event and would like to improve your stroke? This guide, written by Kate Rew, Director of the Outdoor Swimming Society, and Dan Bullock, Director of Swimfortri, is for those who can swim front crawl and seeking structure and advice on getting swim fit.

This guide provides:

- [Getting fit with dry land swim training exercises](#)
- [Developing a weekly routine through fitness, endurance and technique](#)
- [Warm up and cool down exercises for each swim](#)
- [Links to drills and videos to improve your swimming technique](#)
- [Printable template training plan for recording your progress](#)

WEEKLY ROUTINE ON THIS PROGRAMME

Every week you will be asked to do three sessions:

- Fitness
- Endurance
- Technique. Each week we will introduce a simple drill, which is a way of highlighting and practicing one aspect of the front crawl stroke

The plan is (cold acclimatisation allowing) that in two to three months, you'll be fit and ready for a 5k swim. That means in three months time (depending on swim speed) you will be swimming for 1 hour 17 (25 minute miler), 1 hour 33 (30 minute miler), 1 hour 55 minutes (35 minute miler), 2 hours 20 (40 minute miler).

DRY LAND SWIM TRAINING

Start by setting up a three times a week fitness habit.

The focus here is on moving your cardiovascular fitness up a notch, building shoulder strength and flexibility and preparing to swim after a long break.

[Here are some dry land warm up exercises from Dan Bullock – OSS Dry Land Swim Tips](#)

If you have access to a pool, then begin the water work, and repeat weeks until you feel comfortable. Aim for three sessions a week. Four sessions is ambitious and will speed up your fitness gains, whereas two will contribute to your fitness if it's all you can do. Vary the focus point of each session:

FITNESS: Anything cardiovascular for 30 minutes will help. Rowing is a great full body workout that incorporates many swimming muscles. Introduce fartlek to increase fitness gains: this is on-off training where you push for a bit, and then steady-state for a bit. Fartlek training can be applied to cycling, running or rowing.

[Got a stretch cord? Try Dan's Dryland Swim Session](#)

ENDURANCE: Do one longer session a week, up to an hour, of hiking or cycling. Everything you do now to increase your base fitness and endurance will bring dividends later.

CONDITIONING: Work on shoulder strength and flexibility to help prepare you for the pool or open water. Yoga and pilates both provide excellent conditioning for swimmers. Use your own practise, or head to YouTube – 18 minute Yoga for Swimmers with Adrienne, or the 30 minute Vinyasa based Yoga for Swimmers. Also see the six poses on The OSS Yoga for Swimmers.

WARM UP AND COOL DOWN

For every session your warm up and cool down will be the same – a 9 minute WARM UP and a 3 minute COOL DOWN.

Use warm ups as time to clear your mind ahead of swimming: concentrate on being streamlined, being propulsive, pulling with your hand and forearm, gliding through the water and swimming effortlessly.

WARM UP: Before you get in the water try several minutes of dry land arm swinging to jump start your warm up. If you find it hard to get your face in when swimming in cold, open water, dab some water on your cheeks and back of neck before you enter: it all helps remove the shock reflex.

Once in the water, use the first 9 minutes to warm up, consisting of the following: 6 minute easy swimming – get in, get acclimatised, get your face in, and settle in to an easy front crawl. If it takes longer than 6 minutes to settle down in the cold water, take longer, doing a few strokes face in, a few breaststroke, as you need till you are ready for continuous front crawl. For safety, get your body in and acclimatised before submerging your face (even in a wetsuit).

Spend 3 minutes performing 10 strokes fast and 20 strokes easy to actually start to warm up. Stretch the long slow easy strokes out and feel the difference to the faster more hurried strokes. This is a great way to elevate your heart rate.

COOL DOWN: 3 minute easy cool down swimming. If it is safe to perform where you are, double arm backstroke is a great way to unwind your front crawl focused shoulders.

FOUR DRILLS TO IMPROVE YOUR STROKE

During the work in the water we will be practising 'drills', specific exercises that highlight and practise elements of the front crawl stroke.

This training guide encourages you to spend time practicing drills in the pool and swimming in open water. Even if you cannot make it to the pool you can still get familiar with these drills and rehearse mentally – purposely rehearsing these skills and drills in your mind's eye will help programme your body for performance once back in the water.

[Clenched Fist Drill](#) Practiced in Week 1 & 5

[Extension Switch](#) Practiced in Week 2 & 6

[Torpedo Drill](#) Practiced in Week 3 & 7

[Glute Kick Drill](#) Practiced in Week 4

WEEK 1

Aim for the week: Try to find, feel and hold the water.

SESSION 1: FITNESS

Continuous 12 minute swim. Get used to the water, try to find a rhythm and keep your breathing under control. If you are happy, try to change pace/effort levels with 2 minute easy front crawl into 1 minute at a medium pace and repeat the sequence for 12 minutes.

SESSION 2: TECHNIQUE

Continuous 10 minute swim. Swim 90 seconds front crawl into 30 seconds of Clenched Fist Drill. Or 30 front crawl strokes into 10 drill strokes. This week work on the Clenched Fist Drill to improve your hold on and feel for the water. This drill does a great job of making the water feel more solid. Don't stress about counting too much. Try this on feel and just flow into the drill, after a short block of full stroke if it's easier. If you are in a pool you might swim full stroke for the bulk of the length then 10 drill strokes at the start and finish of each length.

[WATCH DRILL VIDEO](#)

SESSION 3: ENDURANCE

Continuous 12 minute swim aiming to breathe on both sides. Try 3 breaths to the left then 3 to the right if it's easier. Focus on pulling with the hand and forearm and build on what this week's drill was helping with.

Can't manage a swim? Catch up with 20 minutes of rowing, cycling or running (even a walk and run mix).

WEEK 2

Aim for the week: The mechanical, clumsy feel should fade as swim fitness improves.

SESSION 1: FITNESS

Swim 2 minute easy front crawl into 2 minute medium and repeat the sequence for 16 minutes. If you can and want to measure progress you can test yourself with the following and compare it to Week 7.

Swim as many 50 metre medium swims as you can in 12 minutes, resting for 20 seconds between each (floating or treading water if not in a pool). Or count 30 strokes and use this to compare - it won't be as accurate as your stroke starts to fatigue and shorten but it is still a fun, hard set to do!

SESSION 2: TECHNIQUE

Continuous 12 minute swim as 90 seconds front crawl into 30 seconds of Extension Switching. This week work on the Extension Switch Drill to help your body position, streamline and learn to breathe to both sides. Be sure to alternate sides on the drill. Or do 30 front crawl strokes into 10 drill strokes. Let the two movements flow in and out of each other, feel the drill shaping your full stroke.

[WATCH DRILL VIDEO](#)

SESSION 3: ENDURANCE

15 minutes easy, enjoyable swim. Try to make this continuous i.e. no touching of any walls (if you are in a pool). It doesn't matter how far or fast you go, just swim with a smile.

Can't manage a swim? Catch up with 20 minutes of rowing, running or cycling.

WEEK 3

Aim for the week: Any harder effort should be restrained by not allowing your technique to fade.

SESSION 1: FITNESS

Swim 1 minute easy front crawl into 2 minutes medium. Repeat the sequence for 18 minutes.

SESSION 2: TECHNIQUE

Perform a continuous 16 minute swim as 90 seconds front crawl into 15 seconds of Torpedo. This week work on your rotation with the Torpedo Drill. Add fins if possible to help the accuracy of this drill. Improved rotation will help lengthen your stroke, improve your streamline and also help you to breathe to both sides if that has been an issue. Or 30 front crawl strokes into four rotations. Try not to breathe during the rotations so you can focus on what the body is doing.

WATCH DRILL VIDEO

SESSION 3: ENDURANCE

Continuous 20 minute swim trying to breathe to both sides. Think about creating the same pulling movements with the arms at the same speed. Push the water back towards the feet not downwards. Symmetry in your stroke will help keep you swimming straight. Balanced and equal rotation is key.

Can't manage a swim? Catch up with 20 minutes of rowing, running or cycling.

WEEK 4

Aim for the week: As your technique improves, your speed should also but more importantly you can swim further for less effort.

SESSION 1: FITNESS

Swim 1 minute easy front crawl into 3 minute medium. Repeat the sequence for 20 minutes.

SESSION 2: TECHNIQUE

Swim for 16 minutes comprising 2 minutes of front crawl and then 10 seconds of Glute Kick. This week we will improve our leg kick with the Glute Kick Drill, which will reduce the chance of kicking from the knee and sinking your legs. Alternatively, do 30 strokes front crawl into as much kick as you can perform on 1 breath before resuming full stroke front crawl. Learning to kick from the hip using your glute muscles will help your body position and reduce energy expenditure.

WATCH DRILL VIDEO

SESSION 3: ENDURANCE

25 minutes easy, enjoyable swim. Try to make this continuous and no touching any walls (if you are in a pool). It doesn't matter how far or fast you swim - just swim with a smile.

Can't manage a swim? Catch up with 30 minutes of rowing, running or cycling.

WEEK 5

**Aim for the week:
Swimming should be
feeling much better.**

SESSION 1: FITNESS

Swim 2 minute easy front crawl into 2 minutes medium. Repeat the sequence for 24 minutes.

SESSION 2: TECHNIQUE

Continuous 18 minute swim performed as a 2 minute front crawl, then swim the single Clenched Fist Drill for 30 seconds. This week work on the Clenched Fist Drill again to improve the way you should be pulling with the hand and forearm. Slightly different is the single fist clenched which really makes the normal hand feel very effective when pulling. Alternatively, do 30 strokes front crawl into 5 strokes just with your left hand clenched, then 5 strokes right hand clenched and repeat the sequence.

WATCH DRILL VIDEO

SESSION 3: ENDURANCE

Continuous 30 minute swim trying to breathe on both sides. Focus on pulling with the hand and forearm and build on this week's drill.

Can't manage a swim? Catch up with 30 minutes of rowing, running or cycling.

WEEK 6

Aim for the week: More splash, effort and bubbles give the illusion of speed but rarely deliver speed. If your heart rate elevates, stroke count goes up or strokes per length increase, then check your swim technique and see where it is failing.

SESSION 1: FITNESS

Swim 1 minute easy front crawl into 2 minutes medium. Repeat the sequence for 30 minutes.

SESSION 2: TECHNIQUE

Continuous 24 minute swim as 90 seconds front crawl into 30 seconds of Extension Switching. This week we will work on the Extension Switch Drill again to help your body position, streamline and learn to breathe to both sides. Be sure to alternate sides on the drill. Or 30 front crawl strokes into 10 drill strokes. If this went well previously you can make it harder by elevating the trail arm up from the hip just above the surface of the water which will encourage your kick! Let the two movements flow in and out of each other and feel the drill shaping your full stroke.

[WATCH DRILL VIDEO](#)

SESSION 3: ENDURANCE

40 minute easy, enjoyable swim. Try to make this continuous. It doesn't matter how far or fast - just swim with a smile.

Can't manage a swim? Catch up with 30 minutes of rowing, running or cycling.

WEEK 7

Aim for the week: Feel good about how far you have come! Swimming 5k is within your grasp.

SESSION 1: FITNESS

Swim 1 minute easy front crawl into 3 minute medium and repeat the sequence for 32 minutes. Or, if you swam the Week 2 test, repeat it here and compare. Swim as many 50m medium swims as you can in 24 minutes, resting 20 seconds between each. Did you manage to double the Week 2 amount?

SESSION 2: TECHNIQUE

Continuous 32 minute swim as 3 minute 30 seconds of front crawl into 15 seconds of Torpedo. Or swim 60 front crawl strokes into 8 slow rotations. This week we will work on your rotation with the Torpedo Drill. Add fins if possible to help the accuracy of this drill. Improved rotation will help lengthen your stroke, improve your streamline and also help breathe to both sides. If it's comfortable and safe try this on your back (navigation will be harder in a lido or open water). The drill can then be swum for longer. Try to keep the head still when rotating the body. The movement is to rotate the shoulder up to the still chin, not a shrug up to the ear. Let the two movements flow in and out of each other, feel the drill shaping your full stroke.

[WATCH DRILL VIDEO](#)

WEEK 7

Finally, how do you swim 5km given the final training set is only 50 minutes?

It's the volume of the training, 21 sessions which amounts to a 40 to 50km total swim distance. You should have the strength and overall resilience to now swim 5k. Do not underestimate what you can achieve if you improve your swim technique and overall level of fitness.

SESSION 3: ENDURANCE

Continuous 50 minute swim trying to breathe on both sides. Mix your breathing pattern to both sides (not just every 3rd), this will reduce bad habits and unbalanced movements. Think about creating the same pulling movements with the arms at the same speed with the same angles. Push the water back towards the feet not downwards. Symmetry in your stroke will help to keep you swimming straight. Balanced and equal rotation is key to make this happen.

Congratulations! You have completed this swim training programme. Time to reward yourself with some well-earned open water swims. You will notice the difference in your stroke and stamina, and your swimming should be easier and more enjoyable.

How has this training guide helped? Tell us how you got on. Join The Outdoor Swimming Society Instagram, Facebook and Twitter channels, and use the #swimcouchto5k to share your feedback, progress and stories. Or email us: hello@outdoorswimmingsociety.com.

TRAINING PLAN

WEEKS TO SWIM	FITNESS (DATE/TIME IN WATER/ DISTANCE)	TECHNIQUE (DATE/TIME IN WATER/ DISTANCE)	ENDURANCE (DATE/TIME IN WATER/ DISTANCE)	SWIM TIME (TOTAL)	NOTES
7					
6					
5					
4					
3					
2					
1					