

Important Practicalities if You're New to Cold OWS

- Find someone you can trust to prioritize you above their own swim. They must be a realist and not laid back about the risks.
- At 50'f (or lower) you mustn't think of it as a swim, but a dip. Your measures of success will be:
 - Not needing someone to help you dress.
 - Make a plan and stick to it, including setting an absolute time limit to your first few dips. You can get out sooner, but not later. The cold will reduce your ability to strategize, problem solve or react correctly to novel situations. However, your brain will retain your plan and follow it.
- Identify who you cannot trust and don't trust them.
- Identify someone who is prepared to be alongside you from arrival in the parking lot until you finish your post-swim hot drink.
- Plan how you will get your car open with fingers that might not be able to turn a key.
- Plan how you will get dressed! Your brain will be in 'tunnel mode' and even getting a sock on could be a major hurdle. Arrange your clothes in order of dressing. When you get dressed you may have the wherewithal of a drunk! Make it easy for yourself.
- When you exit the water do not loiter waiting for other people to get out.
- Keep a hat on until you are fully dressed. (You can swap from swim cap to woolly hat upon exiting the water).
- Do not believe your body when it says 'I'm warm' until a few hours after your swim, especially as you peel your wetsuit off. There's a period when the body has attenuated cold receptors to the cold water, and that attenuation is still 'on' before you are dressed. This results in your body saying 'Hey, I'm out of the water, therefore I'm warm' before you are dry and dressed, when in fact cold air and wind-chill is still reducing your body temperature.
- Unzip wetsuit, strip it down to your legs, one rub with towel. Put towelling changing robe on.
- Get wetsuit off your legs. Stand on old towel, rubber mat or similar.
- Strip off all wet garments under robe quickly. Dry quickly (even only 85% dry is ok). Get clothes on. Around this time, you will feel your skin tingling or burning. Get your clothes on ASAP including shoes and socks. Lots and lots of layers until you look like a Michelin man.
- Be ready for shivers. They are good once you are dressed.
- Sip a hot drink. Jumping up and down etc is good for generating heat too.

How to safely enter cold water and start swimming.

- Wade in slowly with your arms down. It will hurt, but this will pass.
- Wade to about 3 - 4 ft of water and start splashing your face and neck. Do not hurry.
- Bend your knees to get your shoulders and neck seal of wetsuit under water.
- Keep splashing your face.
- Put goggles on and do a bit of flolloping on your back and front.
- After ~3 minutes dip your face in for a second or two. This will hurt.
- Do it again.
- Try a few strokes, head up if you prefer.
- Try a few strokes (e.g. 5) with your face in the water. This will also hurt and bring on 'ice-cream head' (*aka brain freeze*)
- Repeat 5 strokes a few times. Ice cream head may persist – it really depends on the individual. If it's too painful then pootle heads-up, but still occasionally dip your face in. (Ice cream head does reduce and disappear, but it may not go on your first few swims. However, it won't disappear unless you keep putting your head in the water).
- Notice how your breathing comes in gasps to begin with, but will steady up after a few minutes.
- Do clumps of swimming by counting strokes. 5 strokes and stop, repeat. 10 strokes and stop. Repeat. Build up stroke numbers, but don't try too hard. Getting to 25 stroke sets would suffice.
- How long to stay in? This is not formulaic but a very rough rule of thumb that is generally accepted is (for skins) one minute for every degree above 0c (32f), and even with a wetsuit a newbie in their first year should be wary of swimming more than 2 x (water temp in degrees centigrade) minutes. So, your first dip may only be around 12-15 mins. It doesn't sound much but it will be.
- Then get out and get dry and dressed ASAP as detailed earlier. Wait to shower until you're thoroughly warmed up – at least one hour post swim. (A hot shower too soon can cause a drop in blood pressure and fainting).

Author: Kevin Franks MSc., experienced marathon OWS and coach