

25 Tips from Top Swim Coaches

Elite coaches share must-know techniques and insider tips to help you feel comfortable and confident in the water

Avoid Comparison - The first rule of swimming is there is no “right” way to swim. Just as everyone runs differently, the same goes in the pool. All good swimmers incorporate certain elements into their stroke, says Jamie Barone, director of aquatics at Chelsea Piers Connecticut, who adds that you also have to incorporate those elements into what your physiology will allow. That means not to comparing yourself to the swimmer in the lane next to you.

Make a Habit of It - “Going to the pool once or twice a week is a great way to get nowhere,” says Barone. “If you aren’t putting in the time, don’t expect the results.” New to swimming and nervous? The only way to overcome your fear is to get comfortable in the new environment. “That process will speed up exponentially with frequent trips to the pool. Four 30-minute visits is better than one two-hour visit,” says Barone.

Invest in Good Gear - “Find the perfect goggles,” says Robert Pennino, Equinox swim coach and founder of Terrier Tri coaching. Each person has different facial features, so take the time to try on different pairs and choose the best fit.

Go Au Natural - With your hair, that is. No one wants to have to make wardrobe adjustments mid-stroke, so to avoid your swim cap from slipping during practice, Pennino suggests not using hair conditioner the day before.

Drink Up - Because it’s hard to notice sweat in a swimming pool, it’s easy to forget to stay hydrated. Fluids are essential in order to maximize performance, though. “Keep a water bottle at the end of the swim lane and sip it throughout practice,” says Pennino.

Stay Flexible - In order to develop good stroke technique, speed, and efficiency, your body needs to be able to bend, twist, and stretch with each stroke you take. “Otherwise you’ll look and move more like a snake in the water instead of a fish,” says Paula Newby Fraser, eight-time Ironman Triathlon World Champion. Five minutes of basic stretching prior to getting in the water loosens and lengthens muscle fibers and increases circulation.

Keep It Straight - While you may *know* your body should be in a straight line when swimming, is yours, really? “The straighter you are in the water, the less resistance you’ll create, and the easier it will be to pull your weight through the water,” says Amanda Elizabeth Sawyer, swim coach at New York Health and Racquet Club. “This is particularly true in open water where there are more variables, such as waves, current, other swimmers, and aquatic life.”

Blow Bubbles - It sounds like kid stuff, but blowing bubbles in the water is actually an important exercise. “Your head should be submerged as you exhale through the mouth, with a long stream of bubbles being the goal,” says Ellis Peters, Equinox swim coach. “Hum underwater as you exhale. The humming is an audio cue—a reminder that you can still exhale more air.”

Do Look Down - The best way to learn to breathe correctly? “Look down—and I mean down, at the bottom of the pool—for the exhale,” says Sawyer. “By facing downward, you keep your body in one straight line.”

Don’t Keep Your Head Above Water - To breathe during freestyle, your whole face doesn’t need to come out of the water—just your mouth. “Keep your head in a neutral position as you swim and turn just enough so you can take in a breath without losing momentum,” says Sarah Borell, USA Triathlon level 1 coach and certified level 2 U.S. Masters Swimming coach.

Minimize Head Movement - Move your head only for a purpose (namely, to breathe). The more that it moves side to side, the less directly forward you’ll go. Amedeo Pablo Olivares, swim coach at New York Health and Racquet Club and director of operations at Pinero Swim Club, Inc., suggests thinking of your head like the steering wheel on a car—it goes where the body goes, so keep it straight

Focus - In the water, you can't look around, you can't hear, you can't talk—all you can do is let your mind go. If you're thinking negative thoughts, you may create a state of panic. "So, just breathe," says Laura Cozik, Equinox instructor and founder of all-female NYC triathlon group Team Lipstick. "Focus on your good form, focus on your breath, and focus on turning your body into a machine...preferably a Ferrari."

Become Ambidextrous - The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Swim straight by developing strong technique that's well balanced on both sides of the body, says Cozik. She suggests trying single arm swim drills to strengthen both the right and left: Extend one arm in front of the body and hold it there while stroking only with the other arm for entire length of the pool. "You'll learn bi-lateral breathing as well," adds Cozik, "since you can only turn to breathe toward the arm that's stroking."

Back It Up - Believe it or not, the most important part of swimming is what happens between our hips and the top of our head, says Misty Hyman, an Olympic gold medalist and now swim coach at Sanctuary on Camelback Mountain Resort and Spa in Paradise Valley, AZ. In order to keep your hips higher in the water, which makes breathing easier, make sure your head is in a neutral (long, straight neck) position and your eyes are looking down. Then keep your torso straight and lean slightly forward into the water by pressing down toward the bottom of the pool with your sternum. This will help to leverage your hips up to the surface.

Go Long - The front crawl stroke and backstroke both require a swimmer to rotate the shoulders and hips at the same time. The lead arm reaches as the other connects or "catches" and pulls the water past the swimmer's hips. The key to making this an efficient, coordinated effort? "Long arms, long strokes, and long axis rotation should be the focus," says Peters. Extend your arm fully at the beginning of the pull and again at the end of the pull so that your shoulders and hips rotate fully at the same time.

Lengthen Your Stroke - "Many recreational swimmers are not maximizing their stroke length, though it's maybe the single most important detail in swimming," says Radenko Miskovic, elite personal trainer at Chelsea Piers NYC and USA Swimming coach. A longer stroke results in maximum velocity with minimal energy consumption. To improve yours, Miskovic recommends trying straight arm freestyle swimming, demonstrated here. Hint: Imagine you're trying to pick apples from a tree above you, rotating your hips to reach as high as possible.

Protect Your Shoulders - Shoulders injuries are some of the most common among swimmers. When doing freestyle, make sure your fingertips are the first part of your hand to enter the water with each stroke, says Borell. Avoid a thumb-first entry, as it can put a lot of strain on your shoulder.

Draw the Line - To move quickly, focus on pulling straight back as you roll your shoulders and take a breath. "Your hands should not cross over the center line of your body at any point during the stroke," says Olivares.

Switch Up the Pace - It's not very beneficial to swim short laps at a slow pace if you want to become a better, faster swimmer. Instead Miskovic recommends adding some quick sprints to your routine—12 seconds or less at maximum speed followed by recovery. Experiment to find what your max speed is.

Kick It Up a Notch - "Since the legs are the biggest muscle group in the body, they require the most oxygen uptake, so working on kick fitness is vital," says Newby Fraser. She suggests adding a 200-yard kickboard drill into your warm-up.

Whip It - When it comes to kicking, it's easy to do too much. That can be tiring and not nearly as effective as a kick that looks more like a "whip," says Hyman. Imagine trying to flick something off your toe. The whip action starts from your hip and then engages the glutes and hamstrings to lift the leg straight up. "You should feel like you're getting propulsion from both the downward and the upward part of the kick," says Hyman. "If you're doing this correctly your knees will not stay right next to each other—they will scissor apart vertically from your hips."

Point Your Toes - Keep those piggies pointed! This streamlines the body, says Maria Compos, personal trainer and swim coach at New York Health and Racquet Club. "When you don't point, your feet and lower body work against the water, slowing you down."

Swim from the Hip - Don't just kick your feet—think of kicking with your whole leg. "Kick from the hip as opposed to the knee," says Compos. "Bending the knee creates drag and slows you down, while kicking with relatively straight legs allows you to move with less effort, since you're utilizing other muscles like the hips and glutes instead of only the quads."

Perfect Your Turns - Flip turns will help take your swimming (and racing) to the next level—if you perform them correctly. "When approaching the wall and beginning the flip turn, attack the turn by extending your legs toward the wall," says Gregory Kincheloe, head swimming coach of the elite swimming team at the New York Athletic Club. "Don't wait for them to reach the wall from the flip alone."

Hold That Last Breath - When racing, the final push can make all the difference. Kincheloe suggests not taking a breath within the last five yards before the finish, even if you think you should. Instead, focus on getting to the wall as fast as possible—no gliding in. Then breathe when you're done.