Water Workouts: A Gentle and Challenging Fitness Option

Fitness Instructor Julie See explains why aquatic exercise can help people feel fit and healthy.

Over the years, aquatic exercise has acquired a reputation as a wimpy workout for inactive people. But practically every land-based exercise can be adapted to water (with some obvious exceptions, such as inline skating and skateboarding). At many health clubs, step aerobics, spinning (riding a land-based bicycle), yoga, and tai chi classes are all taught in a pool as well as a gym. Whether the class is a gentle version of water aerobics or an intense kickboxing session, you'll feel the workout the next day.

For older people and those just starting fitness programs, water exercise offers two main benefits:

- **Buoyancy**, making exercise easier on the joints
- **Resistance**, which allows you to build muscle strength faster

Water exercise is especially well suited to

- Senior citizens
- People who don't exercise regularly
- People with arthritis, osteoporosis, or other joint problems
- People recovering from medical conditions
- Pregnant women
- People who are self-conscious about their bodies

While most people can benefit from water exercise, people with certain health conditions shouldn't try it. These include people with bowel or bladder incontinence, open sores, uncontrollable seizures, severe osteoporosis, or difficulty breathing. To be sure, ask your doctor.

**Why Seniors Flock to Water Aerobics**

Every Wednesday morning, Julie See teaches a water exercise class in Sarasota, Florida. About 25 people, ranging in age from their 60s to 80s, attend faithfully, working out to the sounds of big band music. The class is 75% women. Most of the participants take water aerobics classes three to five times a week and credit it with keeping them limber and healthy.

They say they love it. They keep coming back. Their loyalty can be attributed to the physical payoffs as well as the social interaction. Plus, the water temperature in the pool is about 83°F, so it's comfortable, allowing them to warm up quickly but not overheat.

Many people in her class have some type of health condition and started water exercise based on a doctor's recommendation. For those with arthritis or osteoporosis, the buoyancy and warmth of the water relieve pain and stiffness and stimulate blood circulation, relaxing their muscles and joints. Even if you don't have stiff joints, exercising in the water builds muscle and strength, which can help prevent problems associated with osteoporosis.

If you're recovering from a medical condition, such as a heart attack or stroke, water aerobics is an easy and safe way to get back into the habit of exercising regularly.
Many people are intimidated when they begin exercise programs, but being in the water means no one can see you. If you feel uncomfortable about your body or you’re worried about keeping up with the instructor, you’re safe beneath the water line. No one can tell if you’ve fallen behind or what you look like.

Getting Started

Before taking the plunge, get an okay from your doctor or health care provider. It's also a good idea to sit in on a few water aerobics classes before joining to help learn the exercises. If you are older, try calling your local YMCA or YWCA or community fitness center to find out about programs tailored to seniors.

Look for a class that matches your ability. People of all ages can learn to swim, so don't let that deter you. Keep in mind that knowing how to swim isn't required for all water exercise classes. Some older people prefer to join a class specifically for seniors. If this is the case for you, be sure the class is geared toward people of your age and interests. Also, make sure that the instructor is experienced in teaching water exercises and has training in basic first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

Other Factors You Might Want to Consider

- **Time and Days of Classes**: The more convenient the class, the more likely you'll stick with the program.
- **Recruiting Friends**: Joining with a friend or two might entice you to attend all classes.
- **Water Temperature**: It's typically best to exercise in water that's 82-86°F unless you have a medical condition that warrants otherwise.

Use your common sense. Always check the water depth before jumping in. Jumping or diving into shallow water can cause serious injuries. Begin your exercises with a few repetitions for a few minutes and slowly work up to longer workouts. Remember to breathe deeply and regularly throughout your exercises and take time to cool down after.

Aquatic Workouts

Water exercises can be as arduous as you want them to be.

Swimming laps, water walking, and water aerobics are a few basic water workouts. If you want to be more creative, try deepwater running or deepwater aerobics, both of which require participants to wear flotation devices. Some fitness centers are investing in new equipment, such as bicycles that work in the water, so they can offer aquatic spinning classes.

Try these water exercises to help you get started:

- Jumping jacks promote cardiovascular health. In chest-high water, stand with your legs together and arms at your side. Do jumping jacks, moving your legs apart and raising your arms to the water's surface. Do about 16 repetitions at a time.
- Walking in water builds endurance and promotes blood flow. In waist- or chest-high water, walk briskly. For a change, try walking backward and laterally with a sidestepping motion. For a great workout, try walking in the water for 20 to 40 minutes, varying your stride and walking forward, backward, and laterally. Water walking is simple, but challenging. Because water is much more resistant than air, walking in the water helps maintain or build muscle mass in your legs faster, without the impact on your joints that comes with walking on land.

In addition to the cardiovascular and strength-training improvements, people often report subtler benefits when they exercise in the water. Water exercises promote relaxation by providing a gentle massage for your muscles. Water exercises also improve sensory awareness—water touching your skin will help develop your *kinesthetic sense*, or awareness of movements. Also, the pressure that water exerts on the body helps blood flow.

Last, but not least, aquatic exercise is inexpensive. You don't need fancy equipment: just a swimsuit, towel, and access to a pool.

Don't be shy about investigating water aerobics. To meet the demand, many community and recreational pools offer classes. You can also visit http://www.geriatricspt.org for more information about water exercise.
About the Author

Julie See is president of the Aquatic Exercise Association and executive vice president of Personal Body Trainers. She's been involved in the fitness industry for more than 20 years. She cowrote Aqua Aerobics: A Scientific Approach and has contributed to numerous fitness publications. See's also produced more than 20 videos on aquatic fitness.