Adult Learn-to-Swim Orientation

A free 60-minute dry-land orientation for adults who want to learn to swim: what lessons are like, a first goal, finding a class, and modest swimwear.

Adults · 60 minutes · For adults, older adults, parents

Scan for the web page, sources and downloads

This is a **one-hour, dry-land orientation for adults who want to learn to swim**. No pool, no swimsuit. People learn what adult lessons are actually like, set a first goal, find a class near them, and talk about what makes it easier to start. It works at a library, community center, place of worship or workplace, and pairs well with a local pool's adult class.

40 million

U.S. adults (15.4%) say they don't know how to swim, and 54.7% have never taken a swimming lesson (CDC survey, 2023).

Source: cdc.gov https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/73/wr/mm7320e1.htm

Learning objectives

- Know that many adults never learned to swim, and that adult lessons are built for beginners at any level.
- Describe what adult lessons cover and what water competency means.
- Set a first personal goal for lessons.
- Find at least one adult class nearby and know the questions to ask before signing up.
- Follow the water safety rules that protect a new swimmer until lessons are done.

Materials

- ☐ A printed list of adult lesson options near you (times, cost, any financial aid), looked up in advance
- ☐ Copies of the Adult Swim Lesson Guide and Swim Lesson Questions sheet
- ☐ Index cards for goal cards, and pens
- ☐ Optional: an instructor from a local pool to answer questions
- ☐ A bilingual co-presenter if your group speaks another language

Lesson steps

1 Welcome: you are not alone — 10 minutes

Share the CDC figures in the Background section: about 40 million U.S. adults say they don't know how to swim, and more than half have never had a lesson. Invite people (only if they want to) to tell a neighbor one place they'd like to enjoy the water: a beach trip, a child's swim class, a pool at the gym.

2 What adult lessons are like — 10 minutes

Walk through how adult programs work, using the American Red Cross adult program as an example.

- Classes are for older teens and adults and are taught by certified instructors.
- You progress at your own pace, mastering one set of skills before moving on.
- Red Cross adult levels: 1) Learning the Basics, 2) Improving Skills and Swimming Strokes, 3) Swimming for Fitness.
- Tell your instructor what worries you and what you want to be able to do. That's normal and it helps them plan.

3 Set your first goal — 10 minutes

Show the five water competency skills from the Red Cross as the long-term goal. Each person writes one first goal on an index card and keeps it.

- Enter water that's over your head, then return to the surface.
- Float or tread water for at least 1 minute.
- Turn over and turn around in the water.
- Swim at least 25 yards.
- Exit the water.

4 Find a class — 15 minutes

Hand out your local list and show the national locators (listed in the section below). Go through the questions to ask.

- Is the instructor certified through a nationally recognized learn-to-swim program?
- Are lifeguards on duty, with current CPR and first aid certification?
- Can I watch a class before I sign up?
- Is there a class for adults who are complete beginners? How many sessions?
- What does it cost, and is financial help available?
- What swimwear is allowed? Are there women-only or adult-only sessions?

5 Comfort and dignity — 10 minutes

Talk openly about what has kept people out of the water and what would help. Write ideas on the board: going with a friend, an adult-only class, modest swimwear such as long-sleeved tops and leggings, a women-only session, an early-morning time.

6 Safe until you can swim — 5 minutes

Until lessons are done, and after: never swim alone; swim where a lifeguard is on duty; wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket on boats and when fishing; don't drink alcohol around water; and know your limits, including medical conditions.

7 Assessment and next step

Before people leave, check that each person has a goal card and has circled one class to call this week. Ask: *What's one question you'll ask when you call?*

8 Take-home

The Adult Swim Lesson Guide and the Swim Lesson Questions sheet, plus the goal card.

Background for the facilitator

Many adults never learned. CDC's 2024 Vital Signs report found that an estimated 40 million adults (15.4%) reported not knowing how to swim and that more than half of adults (54.7%) had never taken a swimming lesson. Adults 65 and older were more likely than adults 18-29 to say they couldn't swim. The report links the gaps between groups to history and access, such as segregated pools and a lack of nearby pools. Read more in learning to swim as an adult.

It helps the whole family. The USA Swimming Foundation reports that if a parent does not know how to swim, there is only a 19% chance a child in the household will learn.

What adult lessons are. The American Red Cross adult program is developed for older teens and adults, taught by certified Water Safety Instructors, and lets swimmers progress at their own pace through three levels. Other programs (the YMCA, city parks departments, U.S. Masters Swimming instructors) use their own levels, so ask.

The goal: water competency. The Red Cross lists five skills to be able to do in every type of water, plus "water smarts" such as never swimming alone, swimming sober, and knowing your limitations, including medical conditions. See water competency: the 5 skills.

Choosing a program. The AAP's checklist for children works for adults too: instructors trained and certified through a nationally recognized learn-to-swim curriculum, lifeguards on duty with current CPR and first aid certification, and a chance to watch a class first.

Modesty and comfort. Writing on the AAP Voices blog, pediatrician Dr. Anisa Ibrahim describes families who skip lessons because the attire most often required for swimming is not allowed by their religion or cultural norms, and argues that long-sleeved swimwear or leggings should be acceptable. These are her views, not AAP policy. See swimming with modesty.

Where to find adult classes

- **Anywhere in the U.S.:** U.S. Masters Swimming's Adult Learn-to-Swim instructor search (by ZIP code), the Red Cross Learn-to-Swim providers map, and Find Your Y. Ask every program about financial assistance.
- **New York City:** NYC Parks Learn to Swim runs free adult and senior classes by lottery each fall, winter and spring. Indoor classes need a recreation center membership. See free swim lessons in NYC for current dates and costs.
- More options in how to find swim lessons near you.

Running the session well

- **Never ask who can't swim.** Let people share only what they choose.
- **Fear is common, and it's fine.** Encourage people to tell their instructor about it. For more, share afraid of the water? how adults can learn.

- **Bring a friend.** Suggest people sign up in pairs or as a group from your organization.
- **Collect nothing.** You don't need names or contact details to run this session.

Take-home sheet

Printable: Adult Swim Lesson Guide resource.aminfoundation.io/printables/adult-swim-lesson-guide

Printable: Swim Lesson Questions resource.aminfoundation.io/printables/swim-lesson-questions

Once lessons start, people can log their progress privately with Swim progress tracker.

What you can do today

Look up three adult classes near you, with times and costs, and print the take-home sheets. If you're the one learning, write your first goal on a card and call one pool this week.

Sources

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4. Swim Lessons for Children: When to Start & What to Consider, American Academy of Pediatrics (HealthyChildren.org). https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Swim-Lessons.aspx
5. Saving Lives and Building Champions, USA Swimming Foundation. https://www.usaswimming.org/foundation/saving-lives-and-building-champions
6. Addressing Cultural and Religious Barriers to Water Safety (AAP Voices; author Anisa Ibrahim, MD, FAAP), American Academy of Pediatrics. https://www.aap.org/en/news-room/aap-voices/addressing-cultural-and-religious-barriers-to-water-safety/
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9. Find Your Y, YMCA of the USA. https://www.ymca.org/find-your-y
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