



# OPEN WATER SAFETY GUIDE

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## INTRODUCTION

The safety guide for the organizers of Open Water swimming competitions is a tool which will help them plan preventative and corrective measures in anticipation of the event.

This guide is used as a reminder to organizers of their responsibilities.

The steps that are proposed in the guide follow the example of preventative steps identified in the safety Guide for the organizers of the sporting event. These steps become precise with guidance from the norms put forth in the safety rules of Swimming/Natation Canada and become concrete using the reminders that are presented at the end of this document. The reminders will permit you to estimate the costs related to the safety measures foreseen for the event and will help to avoid oversights.



## 1. PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

Proposed Steps:

### 1.1 IDENTIFY THE RISK FACTORS

- Human
- Mechanical
- Environmental

### 1.2 ELIMINATION OR CONTROL RISK FACTORS

1.2.1 Awareness of the safety regulations

1.2.2 Take necessary safety precautions

#### 1.2.2.1 PRIMARY PREVENTION

- Guidance
- Information
- Installations and Equipment
- Safety Communication Plan
- Selection

#### 1.2.2.2 SECONDARY PREVENTION

- Detection
- Communication
- First Aid
- Transportation

#### 1.2.2.3 TERTIARY PREVENTION

- Evaluation and correction

## 2. IDENTIFYING THE RISK FACTORS

The first step to prevention is being aware of and identifying the risks associated with Open Water swimming. In addressing the following risk factors, we are able to identify possible problems which may arise.

### 2.1 HUMAN FACTORS

Those directly related to individuals, their psychological and physical states

- Participants' age
- Participants' experience
- Participants' physical condition and technical ability
- Competition stress
- Number of lifeguards and their competence
- Competence of escorts
- Officials' knowledge and experience regarding the venue and rules



## 2.2 MECHANICAL FACTORS

Those related to the quality of the equipment and installations used for the competition

- Swimmers personal equipment (ear plugs, goggles, bathing cap, body fat)
- Stationary watercraft
- Indicator buoys
- Floating docks
- Finish wall (pad) and recovery space (medical)
- Controlled warm up area

## 2.3 ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

Those relating to environmental conditions and nature

- Wind velocity
- Water temperature, air temperature (hypothermia)
- Seaweed
- Tide schedule
- Dangerous fish
- Cleanliness of the water
- Water level
- Motorized watercraft (row boat)
- Visibility (fog, mist)
- Strength of the water current
- Course bottom (entry and exit points)
- Weather conditions
- Floating objects
- Un-authorized watercraft on the course
- Motorized watercraft and escorts
- Watercraft propellers
- Watercraft fuel emissions

Identifying the risk factors will aid in determining preventative measures essential for the participants' safety.

## 2.4 ELIMINATING OR CONTROLLING RISK FACTORS

Once risk factors associated with an Open Water swimming competition have been identified, the next step is to eliminate them, where possible, and to control those which cannot be eliminated. It is preferable to put into practice as many safety/security measures as possible.

If the necessary safety conditions have not been met, it may be necessary to postpone or cancel the sporting event. This is an extreme way to eliminate risk factors.

It may be possible to control certain risk factors by only accepting swimmers of a certain competency level or by ensuring that the equipment is in excellent condition.



The best method to eliminate or control risk factors is to use a systematic preventative approach.

## **2.5 BE KNOWLEDGEABLE OF SAFETY REGULATIONS**

In order to master the safety rules of Open Water swimming, you must have read them over repeatedly such that, without hesitation, you are able to apply or have them applied, literally, word for word.

## **2.6 TAKE NECESSARY PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES**

You must plan all safety measures possible by following the preventative measures as follows:

### **3. PRIMARY PREVENTION**

The first preventative measures presume the availability of physical, human, and financial resources that apply to the prevention of injuries and accidents. They include four (4) aspects: management, information, equipment and installations, and the selection of participants.

#### **3.1 MANAGEMENT**

Management refers to all services that support and allow the event to proceed (to obtain the official authorization, recruit staff). The ability of this management is functional the moment that it is put to work for the operation, the staff, the communication between staff members, the surveillance methods, and the reliability of staff (officials, supervisors, medical personnel, etc.)

The organizer of an Open Water swimming competition must:

- A. Request, either from the municipality or the ministry, for the use of the provincial park, or any other authority able to authorize the use of the competition site:
  - Departure and arrival areas (the beach)
  - Motorized watercraft to follow swimmers in designated areas
  - Motorized watercraft to ensure the safety of the swimmers.
- B. Request officials duly authorized (who have the authority to intervene) to control the circulation of the motorized watercraft in the area where the competition is taking place (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, provincial police, and the municipal police.)
- C. Ensure the presence of proper security people who have the jurisdiction of the site and are authorized to evict off the site, anyone who interferes with the procession of the competition.
- D. When occupying a public beach, reach an agreement with the owner of the installation.
- E. Ensure the presence of lifeguards in sufficient number (In Quebec, according to the safety rules in public swimming pools)
  - The possibility of Hiring Professional Lifeguards / Fees for participation must include Lifeguards participation
  - Staffing criteria for Lifeguards: Depending of the venue, it could be also Ocean qualified.
- F. Obtain or ensure coverage by an insurance policy for any error committed in the exercise of the



functions, while on duty, during the competition, by the organizer or one of his designated officials, aids, or volunteers, remunerated or not. The amount of the guarantee should be at least equal to those held by the Provincial section for losses incurred during the period of guarantee. (Minimum 5 000 000\$ in Quebec)

- G. Ensure the presence of officials (referees, judges, etc.) required according to the rules.
- H. Ensure that the competitors are followed by a personal escort of two people; one being a guide/stroke judge, when the circuit distance is greater than 10km or is not of the closed type. This signifies that a closed circuit of 2km or less does not require individual escorts.
- I. Establish an event schedule
- J. Obtain from the Swimming Federation, a sanction, which should take into consideration the safety rules of Open Water swimming in the province, at the time of the competition.

Note: The swimming federation should obtain a confirmation of the preceding safety points (A-K) before authorizing a sanction for the competition. For races that have particular characteristics or a particular level of difficulty, certain higher safety measures could be requested.

### **Tracking Swimmers During Races**

One of the most critical topics related to swimmer safety during open water races is the concept of “who’s watching the swimmers”

It is strongly recommended that responsible federations work toward a solution of using a tracking device that is able to work in water (for example, sonar or possibly GPS) in order to help track athletes in open water races.

Elaborate an intervention plan that will co-ordinate the personnel and assure rapidness of care. The plan should be accepted by the proper authorities (emergency service, police, ambulance, coast guard) and establish an order in the communications hierarchy.

In an unescorted race, there must sufficient safety craft on the course to very quickly remove an athlete from the water. A ratio of one safety craft for each 20 swimmers is required. This ratio can only be modified with the approval of the sanctioning body (for example, in some races, a swimmer could be rescued directly by shore personnel without the use of a safety craft).

Each race must have an appropriate number of first responders dedicated to the race, who are able to react to a need for assistance within 10 seconds, and are able to reach the swimmer within an additional 20 seconds.

Establish the criteria and modalities for the cancellation or delay of the event while respecting the FINA rules.

- Water temperature
- Water quality
- Visibility
- Wind velocity
- Air temperature

### **A. Water and Air Temperature**

Specific rules must be adopted in relation to water and air temperature for open water races. Race officials must monitor water and air temperatures and water conditions throughout the race in order to



maintain a safe environment. One hour before the race, the safety officer must record, post, and announce the water and air temperatures.

**Requirements:**

- 1) If the water temperature is below 16 C (60.80 F), no race can be held.
- 2) For races of 5 km and above, if the water is above 31 C (87.80 F), no race can be held.
- 3) If the air temperature and water temperature added together (in Celsius) are less than a total of 30, no race can be held.
- 4) If the air temperature and water temperature added together (in Celsius) are greater than 63, no race can be held.

**B. Water Quality**

Water quality of a race must be considered in two phases:

- 1) The anticipated water quality, based on reliable data, when the sanction is requested
- 2) The water quality on the day of the race.

**Requirements:**

- 1) For the location of each swim, local municipality water rules shall apply. If the water quality meets the standards of the local testing authority, the water will be deemed acceptable for the race, unless otherwise determined by the safety officer. The organizing committee must have a document stating that the water quality is acceptable, issued within ONE WEEK of the start of the race.
- 2) If an exceptional event that may affect water quality occurs (for example, heavy rain or flooding), the safety officer (race referee or race director) shall have the authority to postpone or cancel the race.

**3.2 INFORMATION**

The information section includes the information forwarded to the participants before, during, and after the event, to the personnel, to coaches, to spectators, if any, on site, and to the hospital center

**Competition organizers must:**

Establish an emergency and crisis management plan and a communication plan for this plan.

- A. Hold an information meeting for coaches, participants, and officials.
  - An athlete who is competing in the race must either attend the Technical Meeting or have his/her representative attend the Technical Meeting.
  - If the athlete or his/her representative is unable to attend the Technical Meeting, he/she will be required to receive a special briefing in order to ensure that he/she has been informed of all important safety factors for the race.
  - All races must also include a pre-race safety briefing to be conducted immediately prior to the race.
  - **All athletes are required to attend this briefing.**
- B. Hold an information meeting about the safety on watercrafts, the difficulties of the course and the emergency procedures to be utilized by the guides (race officials with respect to watercraft driving and the officials' roles).
- C. Prepare a plan of the course.
  - Buoys



- Distances
- Water current
- Arrival point
- Safety rules

- D. Hold an information meeting with all personnel to identify/define their tasks during the competition.
- E. Advise the hospital center with a precise description of the emergency (hypothermia)
- F. Advise the swimmers, pleasure crafts, fishermen, etc. of the competition if a public beach is being used.
- G. Advise Canada Navigation (coast guard or others) to administer the competition site.

### **3.3 INSTALLATIONS AND EQUIPMENT**

All installations and equipment for the event must be planned for and verified carefully. This step constitutes another important operation of primary prevention. All the necessary equipment for the competition must be set up 30 minutes prior to the event.

#### **Competition organizers must:**

- 3.3.1 Ensure, with the person responsible for the equipment and the installations, if using a public beach, that they conform to the safety rules for public swimming pools in the province and that they are available for the competition.
- 3.3.2 Ensure that the installations and equipment conform to the rules on public swimming pools for the province
- 3.3.3 Ensure that the installations and equipment are conformed to the Rules of Swimming/Natation Canada.
- 3.3.4 Ensure that there are reserved spaces for participants, spectators, and officials.
- 3.3.5 Ensure that there is a feeding station available during a closed circuit race.
- 3.3.6 Ensure that at the start, the participants are wearing a maximum of two bright-coloured bathing caps, are identified by a letter or a number on both arms at shoulder level, on the back and/or on the bathing cap and/or on top of both hands. If there are watercrafts for escorts, they should be identified with the number of their swimmer.
- 3.3.7 Ensure that finger and toe nails are clipped short. Ensure that all swimmers are not wearing any jewellery, including watches.
- 3.3.8 Ensure that there is a personal flotation device, approved by Transport Canada, for each person in the watercraft and an extra one for the swimmer.
- 3.3.9 Ensure that all drivers have a pleasure craft operator card.
- 3.3.10 Ensure that there is a protective grill for the propellers of the escort watercraft.
- 3.3.11 Ensure that the officials' watercrafts are clearly identified and have a good communication system with all escort watercraft. (Cell phones and mobile radios)



3.3.12 Choose a venue ensuring:

- Water cleanliness
- All access areas surrounding the water are clean.
- There is little vehicular circulation or a good way to control the circulation.
- The ends of the start and arrival areas are exempt from any dangerous objects (debris of broken glass, metal, and cans).

3.3.13 Ensure that there are distinctive buoys for the signage: Suggestion highly recommended (Red or Yellow round buoys (120 cm) OR Red or Yellow triangular ones for Turns and smaller ones (45 or 60 cm) to guide swimmers)

3.3.14 Ensure that there are sanitary installations, especially at the departure and arrival areas.

3.3.15 Ensure that there is a parking area close by.

3.3.16 Ensure adequate space to accommodate the swimmers and the officials for the preparation of the competition, during the competition, and at the end of the competition.

### **3.4 SAFETY COMMUNICATION PLAN**

A safety communications plan is required for all races. The responsible federation should develop a safety communications plan template, which would be made available to all race organizers.

#### **Minimum Requirements:**

- A. A safety communications plan must enable efficient water-to-water, water-to-land, and land-to-water communications. Unless otherwise approved by the sanctioning body, two-way radios, with one channel reserved for emergency communications, will be required (for example, it may be acceptable in some circumstances for safety personnel using kayaks to communicate with a system of whistles and hand signals).
- B. Personnel on all boats, safety craft, and feeding platforms must have the ability to communicate with the safety director.
- C. The Safety officer must have the ability to communicate with all first responders, safety personnel, and officials on the course.

#### **Feeding Stations**

Feeding stations are an essential part of all open water races over 5K because of the need to maintain hydration.

#### **Minimum Requirements:**

- D. For races less than 5KM, no feeding stations are required.
- E. For unescorted races of 5KM and longer, there must be a floating or stationary feeding station available every 2 km.



## **Safety during pre-race warm-up and post-race warm-down**

Race organizers must take precautions to keep athletes safe during pre-race warm-up and post-race warm-down. Specifically, no swimmer should be allowed to enter the race course prior to or following the event without an escort kayaker, paddle boarder, etc., or the race host needs to offer course monitoring and safety during set training hours. Race courses should be closed to boating traffic during designated training hours.

## **Course Evacuation Plan**

Each race site must have an approved course evacuation plan to get all swimmers and race personnel off the water with steps in place to address all potential emergency situations.

## **Medical services**

All open water races must have a medical and emergency services plan as part of the Safety plan for the race. At a minimum, this plan must include:

1. A physician on site with experience in providing medical care in endurance events (e.g., marathon, triathlon) and the ability to use the medical equipment described on the medical equipment list included below;
2. One Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) per 150 participants;
3. One ambulance on site or within a five-minute response time per 250 participants;
4. A cooling or heating tent on site, unless the sanctioning body approves otherwise;
5. A protocol for air evacuation if a hospital emergency room is more than 30 minutes away;
6. Medical equipment as provided on the medical equipment list included below.

## **First responders must have the following training:**

- Basic life Support (BLS) level CPR and first aid;
- Swimming ability that will allow the first responder to keep the athlete safe until further rescue/medical help is available;
- Ability to use communication equipment and/or pre-agreed hand signals to begin emergency action.

## **3.5 SELECTION**

The selection step completes the primary preventive measures. Through selection, we are identifying the participants who are able or unable to take part in the event.

### **Prior to the participation:**

- A participant must understand and sign the forms of recognition and acceptance of risk.
- When the participant is 17 years of age or less, the parent or legal guardian must understand and sign the forms of recognition and acceptance of risk.
- The participant must be well prepared and medically fit to participate in an Open Water competition.
- A participant that is 18 years of age or older must understand the ability to participate in an Open Water competition form, read, and sign the form in order to participate in a competition.



The organizers of the event (other than a championship) may have higher standards to be met depending on the nature of the event. For the same reasons, the PS may have supplementary criteria or standards with regards to issuing a sanction.

### **Categories**

A participant in an Open Water swimming competition, approved by a Provincial section, must conform to the following rules:

- Be affiliated with a swimming club that is a member of the PS or be a club member of a provincial or national federation or known by, or affiliated, for the day of the competition, to the organization of the event that is already a member of the PS.

### **Please Note:**

- Swimmers **MUST** be 11 years old and over to participate in any sanctioned Open Water events in Canada.
- Swimmers aged 11 years old are limited to Open Water events of **NOT** more than 1,000m.
- Swimmers aged 12 or 13 years old are limited to Open Water events of **NOT** more than 2,500m.
- Swimmers aged 14 years and older may participate in Open Water events that can range from 5,000m or more.
- The same age restrictions apply to Para Swimmers and will also be in keeping with the FINA suggested distance for their classification.

### **No competition will be sanctioned with wearing a wet suit!!**

An identification card and health status form completed by all swimmers should be available to the medical team. This form should have been verified by the personnel authorized by the organizers so as to authorize a swimmer to take part in the race.

### **Requirements**

In some Open Water swimming competitions, entry requirements could be increased to ensure the security of the swimmers. Example: curriculum and experience of the swimmers, entry standards, previous experience (strongly recommended to swim the distance gradually, 2-5-10km), medical certificate.



## 4. SECONDARY PREVENTION

Even if you have taken all preventative measures possible, primary prevention does not guarantee the absence of accidents. You must also plan a course of action should an accident occur. It is indispensable to have a prompt and effective response to an accident. Without a quick response and quality intervention, the organization cannot offer an optimally secure environment. An organization must minimize any safety issues due to complications and delayed response times.

### 4.1 DETECTION

Detection is the first link in a chain of secondary preventative measures. When an accident occurs, the efficiency of the response reflects back on the conscientious organization. The competition will be as secure as the ability of the security service to rapidly detect all incidents that develop anywhere on the competition site at any time.

- Supervisors-life guards
- Boat behind (behind the last competitor)
- Escort crafts
- Officials

### 4.2 COMMUNICATION

Communication is also an important link as it is the basis for the security system and the speed of intervention. After having detected an accident, the supervisors involved must be able to rely on efficient ways of communication.

- The location of a public telephone or a cell phone.
- The competitor should signal his abandonment to an official, as soon as possible
- The communication system between the officials, safety director and depending on the situation, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, provincial police and the municipal police (portable radio system).

### 4.3 FIRST AID

If the detection and the communication work adequately, first aid should never be delayed. The quality of the care given to the victim depends on human and physical resources available on the event site. First aid might include the evacuation of the victim from the accident site.

The recruitment of personnel who will look after the first aid, and occasionally, the treatment of the injured, can be done with the aid of the Directory of sports therapists available at the Safety in Sports Agency. This brochure gives, by region, a summary of doctors, physiotherapists and sports therapists interested in the field of sports.

- The venue (if not a public beach) must have a first aid station and safety equipment as



enumerated in paragraphs a), b), d) through h) of safety rules in public swimming pools of Quebec

- Should the venue be a public beach, ensure the availability of this equipment with the person responsible for the installations.
- Ensure the presence of a first aid team at the departure and arrival areas (in particular for cases of hypothermia)
- Ensure the presence of a doctor and a medical team for all competitions of 10 km or more in an open circuit.
- Staffing criteria for Lifeguards: Depending of the venue, it could be also Ocean qualified.

**Strongly suggested: Medical assistance boats must be well identified by a RED CROSS SIGN**

#### **4.4 TRANSPORTATION**

To ensure that the victims receive the proper treatment for their condition, their transportation to a place of treatment or a hospital center, may be necessary and must be foreseen.

- Emergency vehicle
- Access to a hospital center

In summary, the resources available, the efficiency of implementing their use, the competency of the people using them, and the speed of their interventions constitute the factors of secondary prevention.

### **5. TERTIARY PREVENTION**

The last step in prevention is composed of evaluation and corrective measures. If a competition is to be repeated, the security system documentation and evaluation will encourage the identification of appropriate corrections and improvements for the next competition.

It is obligatory to produce and deliver to the sanctioning PS, within eight days of the competition, the report they require.

This report should include the infractions brought to the attention of the meet manager as well as any corrective measures which were identified.

In the case of an accident or injury during the competition, produce a report to the PS within 24 hours.

In summary, security during a sporting event does not only focus on the treatment of the injured. It involves many stages, beginning with primary prevention through tertiary prevention.



## TIPS FOR ORGANIZERS

### Eliminate and control risk factors

(Check items planned for the event)

Take note of the safety regulations of Open Water swimming

Take preventative measurement concerning the items enumerated below:

### PRIMARY PREVENTION

#### SUPERVISION

- Recruitment
- Safety personnel
- Agreement with the owner of the installations
- Insurance
- Safety procedures
- Criteria for cancellation of the event
- Sanction
- Municipal authorization
- Police authorization
- Circulation control
- Competition timeline
- Verification of other relevant regulations
- Aptitude form for 18 years old and over
- Consent form for 17 years old and under

#### INFORMATION

- To the participants (rules of the competition and recommendations)
- All the personnel (their tasks) \_\_\_
- To coaches
- To officials (rules of the competition) \_
- To the hospital centre
- To the police
- To the adjacent residents on the course
- To the population
- To the Fire-fighters

#### INSTALLATIONS AND EQUIPMENT

- Venue
- Installation and equipment verification
- Signage
- Sanitary Installations
- Area for participants (reception, resting room)
- Area for officials
- Area for spectators
- Compulsory equipment for participants
- Lighting
- Ventilation
- Parking area
- Warm up area
- Access around the venue
- Feeding station



Watercraft  
Equipment in general  
Boat identification

### SELECTION

Entry requirements  
Categories  
Standards

## SECONDARY PREVENTION

### DETECTION

Supervision  
Supervision life-guards  
Escort watercraft

### COMMUNICATION

Measures used (radio, visual, sound signals etc.)  
Communication network (who is calling whom?)  
Location of the telephone

### FIRST-AID

Personnel First-aid qualification  
Personnel organization  
First-aid kit  
Treatment area  
First-aid material  
Medical personnel  
Emergency vehicle

### TRANSPORT

Emergency Vehicle  
Access to hospital  
Ambulance service

## TERTIARY PREVENTION

### EVALUATION

Accident report  
Event debriefing



## CORRECTION

Corrections  
Recommendations

## APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 First aid kit

APPENDIX 2 Consent form for minors (17 years old and under)

APPENDIX 3 Aptitude form (18 years old and older)



## APPENDIX 1

### FIRST AID KIT

- Pocket face mask to allow rescue breathing without contamination
- One rescue flotation device for each first responder
- Mask, snorkel, and swim fins readily accessible
- Binoculars
- Radio and workable mobile phone
- First aid kit to include supplies for lacerations
- Cardiac defibrillator
- Asthma inhaler/bronchodilator
- Diphenhydramine (for example, Benadryl)
- Benzodiazepine medications for treatment of seizure
- Epinephrine pen
- Intravenous fluids (including ability to rapidly cool with chilled IV fluid in hot weather)
- IV needles/equipment, including large bore (18-20 gauge) needles
- Oxygen with masks
- Glucose tablets

Note: It is recommended to include in the kit suitable accessories to warm the swimmers such as blankets and hot beverages. The materials and quantities must be adjusted according to the number of swimmers participating, the length of the race and weather conditions.



## APPENDIX 2

**CONSENT FORM FOR MINORS (17 YEARS OLD AND UNDER) TO PARTICIPATE IN AN OPEN  
WATER COMPETITION  
(CONSENT FORM)**

\_\_\_\_\_ authorizes  
(Name of parent or coach)

\_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_  
(Name of person 17 years and under)

Date of birth \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in an Open Water swimming  
competition  
(Day/month/year)

Date of event: \_\_\_\_\_

Hosted by: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Body of Water: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Body of Water (City): \_\_\_\_\_

This competition is sanctioned by Swimming/Natation Canada and the Provincial section of  
Swimming/ Natation Canada

Signature of parent or guardian \_\_\_\_\_

Or, by default, his/her coach \_\_\_\_\_

Signed this \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_

Participant signature: \_\_\_\_\_



### APPENDIX 3

**FORM AUTHORIZING A PERSON (18 YEARS OLD AND OLDER) TO PARTICIPATE IN AN OPEN WATER COMPETITION (APTITUDE FORM)**

Please fill out this questionnaire. This is necessary due to the inherent risks associated with Open Water swimming. Your answers will permit us to better help you in case of emergency. Only the Organizing Committee will have access to the information provided below and will be destroyed after the competition.

Name of the competition:

Date of the competition:

Your name:

Date of birth:

Club:

Name of coach:

Emergency contact:

Telephone number:

Other medical / health information that you feel is important for those that may need to administer First Aid (please do not write anything if you have no health problems)

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I consider myself to be of sound mind and health to register for this Open Water competition. I absolve the organizing committee and the PS of all responsibility to any personal harm which may occur as a result of this competition and accept the risks inherent with this type of competition.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_