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Kinder on joints, burns up more calories, great for pregnant women – it's why more and more of us are taking up aqua-jogging, says Peta Bee

As I was clocking up lengths of my local pool recently, to the right of me in a lane of her own was a woman practising a technique that resembled no swimming stroke I had ever seen. Red faced and puffing she was shoulder-deep in water, but appeared more upright than even breaststroke might allow, and was bobbing along rather than ploughing forwards through the water. On closer inspection she was not swimming at all but running in the water, kept afloat by a buoyancy belt and substituting lengths of the pool for laps of a track.

Aqua-running is not new. According to Sammy Margo, spokeswoman for the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, buoyancy vests were developed by physiotherapists for use by injured athletes in the 1980s. Since then, hordes of elite sportspeople, particularly top runners, have followed advice to run in water when they have been injured. Paula Radcliffe uses aqua-running whenever she is injured and last year, Lornah Kiplagat, the Kenyan-born long-distance athlete who competes for Holland, ran almost entirely in a swimming pool during the two weeks before setting a world best time at the Dam Tot Damloop Open Ten Mile road race in The Netherlands.

But it's only recently that the rest of us have cottoned on to the fact that this quirky concept might be a good way to get fit. Local councils, such as mine in Maidenhead, Berkshire, are sectioning off lanes of pools specifically for use by aqua-runners, and both private and public pools (including those in Stirling, Leicestershire, Greater London and Lincolnshire) hold aquajogging group classes. With the likes of Jennifer Aniston reportedly staying in shape by aqua-running for 15 minutes every day, it is a fitness phenomenon in the making.

It is not difficult to understand why a growing number of joggers are choosing to do some training in water. Running on land is a notoriously high-impact activity. Margo says that each time a runner's foot strikes the ground, a shock equivalent to three times his or her bodyweight reverberates from the feet, through the legs and into the

spine. When someone weighing 10st (63.5kg) jogs a ten-minute mile on a pavement, the equivalent of 1 million lb of impact is sent through their body.

In water, though, it's a different story. Water, acts as a giant cushion for the body and is much kinder to joints and tendons than tarmac and other surfaces. "The deeper you wade into a pool, the lighter your body comes," Margo says. "American research has shown that waist-deep water reduces the pressure on joints by 50 per cent, chest-deep by 75 per cent, but if you work out in water up to neck level, as with aqua-running, your bodyweight is effectively reduced by as much as 90 per cent."

It is not just the injured or those with vulnerable joints that can benefit. Margo says that the buoyancy of water makes it perfect for pregnant women, too. "Not only does the water relieve pressure on their laden-down joints and bladder, but the coolness of the pool keeps their body temperature – and that of their unborn baby – cool, too," she says. In fact, it is suitable for almost everybody, even those who can't swim and, says Margo, "for the self-conscious who don't like heading out in Lycra and trainers, this way they can keep the body hidden underwater".

Studies by Dr Robert Wilder, a physiologist and the director of sports rehabilitation at the University of Virginia, have shown that the added resistance of water – it is 800 times denser than air and provides up to 12 times the resistance you get on land – means that you work harder and expend more energy pool-running than you do on land. He found that while regular runners burn about eight calories a minute, aqua-runners burn 11.5 in the same time, which he attributes to the upper body and arms having to work harder than they have to on a regular run outside because of water resistance. Like the front-crawl, it works most of the big muscles, although not in exactly the same way (swimming works the shoulder muscles harder; aquajogging the biceps and triceps).

It also compares favourably to treadmill running in terms of boosting aerobic capacity. "Since water lacks the gravitational pull you get on land, just staying upright requires you to use opposing muscles for every action," says Louise Sutton, a senior lecturer in health and exercise sciences at Leeds Metropolitan University. "Everything you do in water involves more effort, so more calories are used up." For regular runners, Dr Wilder recommends transferring their land workouts directly to the pool. "So, for example, if you were normally running half an hour at a moderate pace on land, you need to do 30 minutes at a moderate pace in water," he says.

Likewise, the fitness returns are comparable to land running. If aqua-running is to be your main sport, at least three runs of 30 minutes a week will be needed to get you fitter. Sutton says: "It is probably best used as a form of cross-training, interspersed with regular running or other workouts at the gym." If there are any criticisms of aquajogging it is that you move more slowly than you do when swimming and so the

kind of boredom associated with swimming length after length of a pool is prolonged. Still, that is a small price to pay for the benefits you can reap.

As it grows in popularity, so do the accessories (see panel right). At the very least, you need a buoyancy vest or belt to keep you afloat. Enthusiasts can buy water-specific trainers, designed to protect the feet from brushing against abrasive pool floors and to add resistance that pushes a workout to a new level. Mitts and hand floats are also available to provide upper body resistance that will help to strengthen and tone the arms. "Aqua-running is essentially a simple activity, so you don't need much more than a belt to keep you off the ground," Sutton says. "Extras might make a workout a bit tougher, but they are not necessary. You will get out of the pool exhausted after any aqua-running session."

Many local pools offer aquajogging, as does the Virgin Gym group at selected gyms. Call 0845 1304747; www.virginactive.co.uk

What is aqua-jogging?

Also known as **deep-water running**, aquajogging is performed in a pool deep enough to stop your feet hitting the bottom. A **buoyancy aid** is worn to keep you afloat and to enable you to "run" rather than tread water. It's perfect for injured runners or anyone with **vulnerable knees** who finds pounding the roads too painful. And anyone can do it, even those who can't swim.

How to do it

Find a spot in the pool where your chin should be about 1in-4in above the water. Your feet should not touch the ground. Lean forward slightly from your hips and imagine that you are running fast up a gentle hill or into a headwind. Use your arms as you would for running on land. Bend them at 90 degrees and keep them close to your body. You will have to pump them more vigorously because of the resistance of water. Although your feet shouldn't touch the floor, try to imagine pushing off the bottom of the pool when your foot is beneath you. Practise a "pawing" action.

SORTED AQUA-JOG AIDS

AquaJogger belt, from £28.95 The one thing you need is a flotation belt or jacket. The bestselling AquaJogger is designed to suspend the body at just the right depth. Varieties include the classic (good for beginners) to one for children.

Stockists The Physical Company (physicalcompany.co.uk)

Aqx Aquatic training shoe, £74.95 Designed to make aqua-running more like running on land, this top-of-the-range trainer has a snug sock-liner, six drainage holes and a mesh upper for ventilation. It also has built-in resistance scoops, or

“gills”, that catch water as you jog and provide 20 to 30 per cent more resistance than running barefooted.

Stockists swimshop.co.uk

Finis LapTrack, £39.15 Like swimmers, aquajoggers often have to rely on either a waterproof stopwatch or their memory to record how long they have been in the pool. But this device, pictured above, which fixes to the wall of a swimming pool, records the number of lengths completed and the time it took to jog them each time you press it.

Stockists Swim Shop, as above

Arm resistance aids, from £15.95 a pair Water provides your arms with a much tougher workout than you would get on land. But to tone your upper limbs even faster, use either aqua-mitts, which are shaped like fins, or aqua-dumbbells as you do your jog around the pool.

Stockists Physical Company, as above



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