

#DrowningPrevention

The Hidden Dangers of Reservoirs

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www.water.org.uk

# Reservoirs are dangerous and the government advises against swimming in them.

According to the [National Water Safety Forum](https://www.nationalwatersafety.org.uk/), more than half of deaths from drowning happen in inland waters, such as rivers, lakes and reservoirs.

The risks of unauthorised swimming in reservoirs are not widely known and unfortunately there have been several serious accidents and fatalities at UK reservoirs this summer.

A reservoir is nearly always man made and, because of their purpose, they carry a set of specific dangers in addition to those which apply to other outdoor settings.

English and Welsh water companies want to keep everyone safe. Please follow this simple rule when visiting their reservoirs:

**Stay out of the water, no matter how strong a swimmer you are.**

**Why Reservoirs are Dangerous**

1. Hidden dangers under water, including machinery
2. Very cold and deep water
3. Strong currents created by working pumps and pipes
4. They are often remote and inaccessible making it difficult for emergency vehicles to access

Reservoirs can look enticing to swim in, but they do contain a number of hidden dangers - from heavy machinery under the water, to dangerous currents and cold temperatures.

While the surface may seem calm, the hidden pipes and pumping machinery essential to the operation of a reservoir can create strong and dangerous currents underwater which are difficult to see from the surface.

Reservoirs often feature sharp drops and steep sides which can make it difficult to get out if you find yourself in trouble.

The temperature of a reservoir is also rarely above 10°C even in the summer months. This is cold enough to put a person into cold water shock - even in the height of summer.

Cold-water shock can instantly affect breathing and movement - even among strong and confident swimmers. It can

* Cause you to inhale as you go under the water, due to an involuntary gasping reflex, and drown without coming back to the surface.
* Drastically reduces your ability to hold your breath underwater
* Induces vertigo as your ears are exposed to cold water, resulting in failure to differentiate between up and down.

If you get into trouble access for emergency vehicles is often extremely challenging, rescue can require specialist equipment. Additional difficulties on reaching someone in trouble exist for reservoirs in remote locations.

**What should I do if is see someone in trouble in the water or I fall into the water?**

If you find yourself in the water after an accident you must: [**FLOAT TO LIVE.**](https://rnli.org/magazine/magazine-featured-list/2018/july/how-to-float) Fight your instinct to swim and try to keep calm.

The Fire Service has crews specially trained in water rescue. If you see someone in trouble in the water you must **call 999 immediately and ask for the Fire Service**. Stay on the line with the emergency services to help them find your location and for them to help advise you.

**Never** **enter the water yourself.** Advice from the [Royal Life Saving Society](https://www.rlss.org.uk/enjoy-open-water-safely-this-summer) is to call the emergency services, encourage the individual to relax and float on their backs. **Only if it is safe to do so** and without endangering yourself, lie down or stay secure and see if you can reach out to them with a stick, pole, item of clothing. Alternatively throw something buoyant to them such as a ring buoy, part-filled plastic container, ball, or anything that will float

**Where can I swim outdoors?**

If you would like to experience wild swimming or outdoor water sports, there are numerous official sites across the UK (including some run by water companies) where safety checks have been carried out.

In addition to lifeguarded beaches on the coast, there are currently over 100 sites inland as well, usually at lakes or docks.

* At an official site you can be confident of the water quality and that there are no hidden obstacles under the water.
* Good venues will have lifeguards
* There will be safe and easy access to the water to enter and importantly exit as well, there may also be alternative exit points (e.g. safety ladders) in case of emergency.
* Many will have changing facilities, toilets and often cafes or shops for snacks and drinks.

**Wherever you choose to go swimming, whether in indoor pools or official bathing areas outside, ensure you know how to keep safe and what to do if you or someone else gets into trouble in the water.**

# Appendix 1

The latest figures from the Water Incident Database ([WAID](https://www.nationalwatersafety.org.uk/waid/interactive-report/)), which is maintained by the National Water Safety Forum, show that in 2020 there were 254 accidental drownings and 631 total water-related fatalities in the UK. Of those who accidentally drowned, 43 per cent had no intention to enter the water.

Water companies across the UK own and operate numerous working reservoirs which are part of the important infrastructure supplying homes and business with water every day.

Companies across the UK work with many different recreational groups supporting access for agreed purposes as diverse as mountain biking, sailing, angling and other activities. To enjoy water activities, look out for these official groups or check with your local water company. Official groups will have necessary training, understanding of the waters and will have undergone the necessary safety checks.

Open water swimming, except at an agreed and designated site, does not meet the necessary safety criteria. Unauthorised swimming is not permitted at any water company site in England and Wales.

In Scotland, while access to inland waters is part of a general right of access, Scottish Water ask for you to [respect the reservoirs](https://www.scottishwater.co.uk/your-home/campaigns/respect-our-reservoirs), be aware of hidden dangers and hazards which make swimming in reservoirs extremely dangerous.