Aqua Jogging for Runners

Aqua jogging, or deep water running, is the best form of cross training for runners. The movement closely mimics running form, which provides a neuromuscular workout that, in addition to aerobic benefits, helps keep the running specific muscles active. Most importantly, aqua jogging is impact free, which means it can be implemented during almost any injury.

If you’re cross training because of injury, studies have shown that aqua jogging can enable a well-trained runner to maintain running fitness for up to 4-6 weeks. Study 1 - Study 2 - Study 3. Likewise, if you’re using aqua jogging as a cross training method between hard workouts, studies have shown that pool running significantly reduces post run soreness and speeds up recovery.

The only downside to aqua jogging is that you need a pool that is deep enough to run in without touching the bottom. If you’re lucky enough to have access to a pool of this size, aqua jogging should be your first cross training choice.

Aqua jogging form should mimic your running style fairly closely. You’ll want to submerse yourself in the deep end of the pool and use an aqua jogging vest if you’re a beginner or not a good swimmer. The vest is a nice tool, but once you get the form down, it isn’t necessary. The trick to aqua jogging form is to keep your upper body straight and to not lean forward too much. You should practice using a higher knee lift and a more compact back kick than when on running on dry land. This will allow you to remain upright and also enable you to perform harder sprinting activities. Here is a quick YouTube video of a runner who practices good pool running form.

Also of note, elevating your heart rate in the pool will be more difficult than on dry land. Since your cells are 65-95% water, blood circulates better when submerged, which means your heart does not need to pump as hard to circulate oxygen. So, benefits from pool running must come from a constant, steady effort or intervals.

Sample workouts

Rest = No jogging, just rest in the water

Easy = 65-75% of Maximum Heart rate. Basically a typical easy/recovery run effort

Medium = 87-92% of maximum heart rate. What you would consider a hard tempo run effort; comfortably hard.
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Hard = 95-100% of maximum heart rate. All out sprints.

Easy

Easy pool running should only be used as warm-up for harder aqua jogging workouts, a recovery tool between hard workouts, or to simulate longer training runs.

You can perform easy pool running just like you would perform easy running on dry land, there is nothing fancy about it. You should try to maintain a heart rate that is 65-75% of your maximum heart rate.

Medium

1. 10 min easy w/u, 1:00 hard, 30 sec easy, 1:30 hard, 30 sec easy, 2:00 hard, 30 sec easy (continue building up until 5:00, and then come back down by 30 second intervals) 10 min easy c/d

2. 10 min easy w/u, 1min medium, 1 min sprint, 30 sec hands in air (keep moving your legs in the running motion, but put your hand above your head), 1 min rest – repeat 10-15 times. 10 min easy c/d

3. 10 min easy w/u, 30sec sprint, 30sec medium, 30sec sprint, 30sec medium – 30 rest, Repeat 12-15 times, 10 min easy c/d

4. 10 min easy w/u, 10 sec medium, 10 second sprint, 10 second easy, 20 sec medium, 20 sec sprint, 20 sec easy, 30 sec medium, 30 sec sprint, 30 sec easy, repeat up to 70 seconds and the back down, 10 min easy c/d

Hard

One of the difficulties of cross training is replicating those truly lung-busting, difficult workouts. With the pool, I’ve actually found a very nice trick to help make pool running as hard as any track workout you might do. If you’re going to be pool running quite a bit due to injury or limited training volume, invest in a bungee cord designed for sprinters.

Tie one end of the resistance band to a sturdy object (pole, lifeguard stand, pool ladder) and bring the other into the water with you. Put the strap around your waist and aqua jog away from your starting point. You’ll begin to notice the bungee tighten and resist against you (depending on the length of your pool, you
may need to wrap the bungee around the supporting object or tie it in knots to make it shorter to feel resistance).

Spend a few moments testing yourself to see how far you can pull the bungee. This is a great challenge and a fun way to compete with yourself during an otherwise boring cross training activity.

Finally, pick a point on the pool wall or side of the pool that you feel stretches to bungee to a very hard sprint that you could maintain for 60-90 seconds. This will be your “sprint” marker that you’ll use on sprint intervals. Likewise, find a point that feels like the end of a hard tempo run. Mark this spot as your “medium” interval distance. Now, when you complete the hard workouts, you can use these reference points to ensure that you maintain a very hard effort.

1. 10 min easy w/u, 90 sec easy (slowly moving out and stretching the bungee), 2 min medium, 1 min sprint, 1 min rest (let the bungee pull you back – this is kind of fun) x 10, 10 min easy c/d

2. 10 min easy w/u, 90 sec easy, 5 min medium (focus and concentrate, just like during the hard part of a race), 30 sec sprint, 2 min rest, x 4, 10 min easy c/d

3. 10 min easy w/u, 90 sec easy, 2 min sprint, 90 sec rest x 12, 10 min easy c/d

I guarantee that with the bungee, you’ll get your heart rate through the roof and push the limits of your VO2 max.

Cross training can be tough, especially when you’re injured or want to be increasing your volume faster. By providing a variety of workouts and implementing some aqua jogging, you’ll emerge from your injury with minimal fitness loss and challenge your aerobic system without the pounding.