

# SWIMMING FOR

# WEIGH

by Elise Oberliesen >>> illustration Rick Gutierrez

**W**hen Danielle Drotar heads to the pool, she likes to be ready for her workout. The former USA swimmer from Broomfield, Colo., wants to make every minute count, and, for swimmers who use the sport to get into shape and stay fit, this is really important.

"You can get so many different kinds of workouts in the pool, like cardio and strength," Drotar says. She uses hand paddles to strengthen her upper body, and also says using paddles and a pull buoy together to make her workout even harder, and "you really feel it in your shoulders."

**Elise Oberliesen is a freelance writer from Colorado.**

A competitive swimmer since she was 8, Drotar, now 19, uses the Web site [www.swimworkouts.com](http://www.swimworkouts.com) to add variety. She looks for

ways to transform her aquatic workouts into fun, refreshing ways to burn calories and shed pounds.

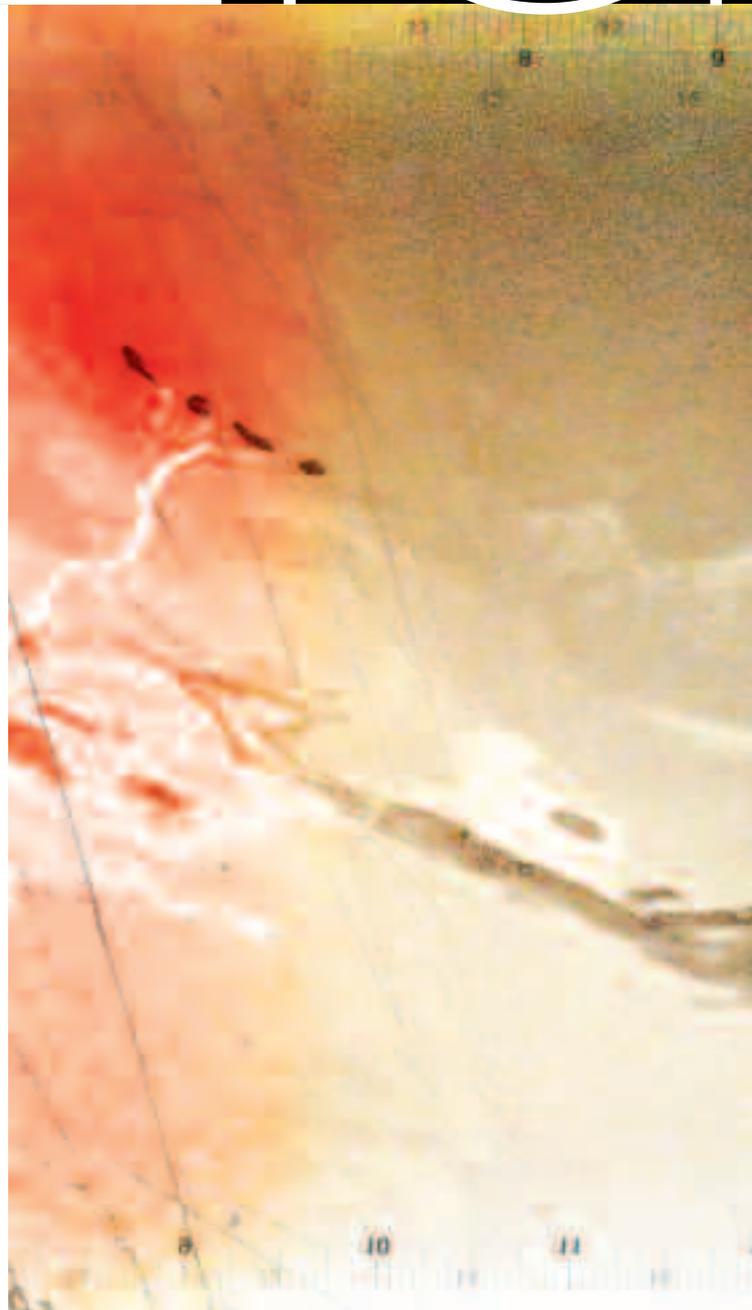
But is swimming a good way to control body weight?

It depends on whom you ask. The issue of whether swimming is viable for weight loss has been debated for years, and enthusiasts are still raising the question often in chat rooms and on Web logs. The answer is as complex as the human body, but many experts agree that weight control is a balancing act between exercise and nutrition.

"Swimming is a great exercise," says Rich Weil, exercise physiologist at St. Luke's New York Obesity Research Center in New York City. But if you really want to see the pounds drop off the bathroom scale, Weil says, you must create an energy deficit.

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# LOSS?

Experts Offer Their Advice  
While the Debate Continues



# AD

lose weight,” Weil says. “The people who reduce their caloric intake lose much more weight.”

By simply reducing your caloric intake and focusing on diet, Weil says, you can expect to lose five to six times more weight than if you hadn’t decreased calories. Many folks trying to shed a few pounds use exercise and diet in combination.

Exercise is good, and swimming is good exercise. But Weil says don’t expect exercise alone to be the answer for weight loss. “Exercise is the single best predictor of keeping your weight off—it’s just not as good at helping you lose it.”

Despite the abundance of speculation about the best exercise for weight loss or weight control, most people who have studied the subject say swimming does not appear to be any better, or any worse, than any other form of exercise. No data suggests that swimming is superior to cycling, or vice versa, Weil says.

Most experts agree that reducing net caloric intake is essential for weight loss, but creating too large a calorie deficit is counterproductive, warns Karen Dolins, a nutritionist and exercise physiologist from Columbia University Teachers College in New York. Dolins says not having enough fuel can cause the body to shut down or become overly hungry, which can lead to overeating later on, after the workout is over.

“You have to know something about your body’s physiology, and you have to know how interrelated nutrition and exercise are,” Dolins says. “The mistake most people make is that they don’t eat enough. Have something to eat before you get into the pool.”

Apparently, weight loss associated with exercise actually occurs after the workout is over. But it can only happen if you have burned more fuel than you have taken in. “What matters is your energy deficit; when you have a deficit, you

will draw the fat out of your cells,” Dolins says.

Some athletes say they aren’t sure whether they should supplement their swimming with other exercises. “I think [swimming] is a great way to stay in shape, and keep the weight off,” says Janet Jasker, 44, a long-distance Masters swimmer from Holland, Mich.

Jasker believes swimming helps decrease fat and increase muscle, but does not necessarily shave numbers from the scales. She is in great shape, and she stays that way with swimming, weight training and Pilates. She heads to the pool about four days a week, and her workouts consist of 3,500 to 4,000 yards, taking her about an hour and a half to complete.

One of the biggest challenges that swimmers report is the hunger they experience after a workout. One theory suggests that because water cools the skin, swimmers’ appetites are not suppressed as much as athletes whose bodies heat up during exercise, says Alicia Kendig, MS, RD, a Colorado Springs, Colo., swimmer and registered dietician at Carmichael Training Systems, founded by Chris Carmichael, coach to Lance Armstrong, the record-holder for most Tour de France wins.

After a swim, “hunger is not suppressed in the same way as cycling or running,” Kendig says. She believes that, unlike swimming, exerting energy during a run or bike ride causes the body’s core temperature to rise, and that hike in temperature unlocks the body’s ability to “suppress appetite.”

“Swimmers tend to overeat more when their core temperature hasn’t risen,” Kendig says. Plus, eating raises the body’s temperature, so it helps swimmers heat up again after they get cold from swimming.

Jasker and Drotar both say they experience hunger after intense pool workouts, but Drotar adds, “I feel hungry if I do any exercise.”

Drotar does a little prep work to combat hunger pangs. She tailors meals to her workouts and tries to follow the plan as best she can. When she stays on track, it helps her stay ahead of the hunger cycle.

“If I eat what I’m supposed to, what I’ve planned out for a meal, I won’t be as hungry after a swim,” says Drotar.

Experts say everyone has a unique string of DNA that gives them different strengths and weaknesses, and also a different resting metabolic rate (RMR)—which is the amount of calories a body burns while inactive. Even at rest, the body burns some calories breathing, regulating body temperature and sleeping.

A person with a higher RMR burns more calories than someone with a lower RMR, even when they are both doing absolutely nothing. If your RMR were 1770, for example, and you did nothing from the time you woke up until the time

you went to bed, your body would require 1770 calories to maintain its current weight. A person’s resting metabolic rate represents about 75 percent to 80 percent of his or her daily caloric needs, according to *MedGenMed*’s eSection on Clinical Nutrition & Obesity.

The rest of your daily calories are those you burn while working, regardless of what you do, and while working out. These calories are the ones addressed by weight loss programs. If weight loss is the goal, Dolins suggests trying the American Dietetic Association’s model. ADA recommends expending 2,000 calories per week, usually amounting to one hour of exercise a day, five or six days a week.

Dolins also says athletes should consider VO2 Max testing to better understand their bodies’ unique caloric needs. Measuring VO2 Max involves strapping a tube to your nose and mouth, jumping on a bike

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or running on a treadmill until your lungs are about to collapse. The results can shed light on the intensity and duration needed for your body.

If you want to test your VO2 Max, Dolins suggests working with a registered dietician who is a board-certified in sports dietetics by the American Dietetic Association. She says certified individuals have the education and experience to correctly interpret testing results.

Hand-held indirect calorimeters are devices used to measure RMR and are another option to consider at the fraction of the cost of VO2 Max. It is considered a “10-minute breath test” and

does not require physical exertion like VO2 Max.

Indirect calorimeters measure oxygen consumption, then calculate and display the RMR. This number helps dietitians and fitness trainers tailor a fitness regimen and nutrition strategy for you.

Although there may be some new evidence to indicate swimming helps bone density, most swimmers and physiologists still consider swimming to be a non-weight-bearing exercise. They suggest supplementing swims with walking, running and skiing to ensure the health of bones.

However, heavier swimmers benefit from water’s forgiveness

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**Many are drawn to swimming for its promise to tone the body. With all major muscle groups in motion, it's easy to see why swimmers report less flab and more firm. Everything is moving—from the neck rotating side to side to drink air, to the arms pulling like oars cutting through water and a forceful kick that powers the body forward.**

on the joints, and that's not so bad, says Scott Lucett, education director at the National Academy of Sports Medicine in Mesa, Ariz.

Weight-bearing or not, swimming is especially good for overweight people who cannot walk or run because of pain. Lucett says that swimming can be a wonderful transition into other activities.

"When their weight is lessened, then it will be important to add in more of the weight-bearing activities," Lucett says.

One good reason to encourage swimming may just be for the

sheer joy of it, Lucett says.

Because people are more likely to stick with exercises that are fun, Lucett says joyful exercises can lead to good habits that could last a lifetime.

Intensity and pushing hard enough to get the heart pumping are what matter to Dolins and her clients. An accomplished triathlete herself, Dolins says that during a swimming workout, it's important to be aware of intensity level. She asks patients how often and how hard they swim to gauge whether they are doing what it takes to get the desired results.

"Usually their perception is that they are doing more than they are," she says, "and that misperception may contribute to the belief that swimming isn't doing them any good."

Drotar realizes that intensity level matters when it comes to making the laps count. One cue that helps her know she's working hard enough in the water is when she becomes slightly winded and "a little bit fatigued."

Although the chilly temperatures in the pool make it harder for her body temperature to rise, Drotar makes a point to turn the heat on and monitor exertion.

"When my face is hot, I know I am sweating," and she says this is what she is striving for—to get the best pool workout.

High power is something Theresa Irwin, 22, admits is all hers. When Irwin pulls out the kickboard and puts some mileage on it, she notices results right away, and they're in the form of "inches lost," she says. Irwin, also a former USA swimmer and friend of Drotar's, powers through her kicks effortlessly because her muscles are trained to go fast and hard. There also is one small caveat that keeps her kicking—maintaining her beautifully shaped legs.

She says it's a great method for toning up the stomach and thighs. To get a good kick with the kickboard, Irwin said it's important to stay "in line and on top of the water," a technique that helps her maintain good form.

Paying attention to leg positioning helps Irwin to pack in the power during sprint sets, and give her workouts a boost. You have to "pull your legs closer to the surface" and not let them drift down, she says.

Each time you pull the legs into a parallel position, it forces you to work harder.

When she wants to really feel the burn, Irwin turns up the intensity with sprint sets. Her typical sets include

20x25s, 8x50s or 4x100s.

Many are drawn to swimming for its promise to tone the body. With all major muscle groups in motion, it's easy to see why swimmers report less flab and more firm. Everything is moving—from the neck rotating side to side to drink air, to the arms pulling like oars cutting through water and a forceful kick that powers the body forward.

But what's often forgotten is swimming's ability to calm the spirit and slow the mind's endless chatter. After the workout is finished and the towel and wet bathing suit are neatly balled together as one, a peace washes over the entire body, mind and spirit. It's a pleasant lethargy that you don't want to cure, and would be happy to endure all night long, while sitting next to a blazing fire.

With her excellent biceps, it's obvious that Drotar is in her fitness prime, and not like those other swimmers seeking a smaller-sized Speedo. However, she did say swimming is a smart way to lose weight because it helps relieve stress, and Drotar believes stress reduction helps to lower Cortisol and fat storage.

"When you're stressed, you store fat," she says.

As a long distance swimmer, Jasker is drawn to the sport by her competitive heart. With seven years in the Masters swimming program, it's also obvious that all those friendships Jasker has cultivated through the years are motivation to keep her coming back for more.

Jasker is among the swimmers who enjoy the magic that water bestows to the psyche.

"It does a lot mentally to manage stress," Jasker says. "If I don't get in the water, I definitely feel a need to." <<<

••• **Editor's Note:** Drotar and Irwin are both former Masters swimmers who plan to resume their Masters workouts once they complete their full-time college schedules.

### Need some help keeping track of calories?

••• Consider one of the largest online food databases at [www.calorieking.com](http://www.calorieking.com). Look up favorite foods and calculate your daily calorie intake. [Fitday.com](http://Fitday.com) is another great Web site to help track calorie consumption.

### Nutrition to Stave Off Hunger After Your Workout

- Eat a 200-calorie snack within 15-30 minutes of a workout to speed recovery, an important factor for athletes who work out more than once a day.
- Whether hungry or not, post-workout snacks help prevent overeating later in the day. Prepare snacks ahead of time and toss them into your gym bag.
- Don't forget your water bottle. Drink 7-10 oz. every 10-15 minutes while swimming.

#### Try these snack ideas:

- Medium apple and 1 tablespoon of natural peanut butter, about 162 calories
- Lowfat yogurt with a half cup crushed pineapple, 240 calories
- Two Fig Newtons, 110 calories
- Power bar, harvest bar or other prepackaged sports bar, about 200 calories.

Source: Alicia Kendig, RD, CTS