

Experts warn continued pool closures are 'building up health problems for the future'

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While pools are shut during the latest national lockdown, Swim England is leading the charge for them to be classed as essential services to help millions of people who rely on the water to get active.

In the first of three articles focusing on how aquatic activity can help ease a variety of debilitating conditions, specialists explain why increased pressure will be piled on the NHS and social care system if pools are not reopened as soon as coronavirus restrictions are eased.

Leading health experts have warned that the continued closures of swimming pools are 'building up health problems for the future'.

They say it is 'critical' pools safely reopen at the earliest available opportunity to help more than 20 million people living in England with long-term conditions that cannot be cured but which require ongoing support from health and social care services.

Surgeons, physiotherapists and rehabilitation specialists have said the 'specific and unique benefits of using the water' to help treat these conditions is being lost – and aquatic activity offers a 'safe and effective environment' where people can manage their physical and mental health.

Swim England has shown how pools can help save the NHS and social care system more than £357 million a year as being in the water can help manage a range of conditions and reduce the amount of visits to GPs or hospitals for treatment.

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Scarlett McNally is a consultant orthopaedic surgeon and lead author of Exercise: The Miracle Cure produced by the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges.

She supports Swim England's plea for pools to be allowed to reopen as soon as the current national lockdown restrictions are eased and said: "Swimming is an excellent form of exercise, especially for people with problems with their feet or joints.

"People often don't realise how much exercise they are getting because they don't feel sweaty in water.

“There is overwhelming evidence that exercise is better for mental and physical health than many drugs.

“Regular exercise reduces the risk of dementia, heart problems and cancer and also helps treat common medical conditions.

“It is such a shame people can’t access swimming pools now.

“This is building up health problems for the future.”

Safe and effective environment

Research conducted jointly between East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust and Canterbury Christ Church University has shown the impact pool closures have had on people struggling with lower back problems.

Helen Oakes, advance practice physiotherapist and PHD researcher, who was involved in the study, said 78 per cent of participants felt that pool closures had impacted on the management of their back pain.

“Physically, participants reported experiencing more back pain or flare-ups, gaining weight, having to restart medication, sustaining injuries due to trying another form of exercise, being less active and less mobile,” said Helen.

“Psychological impacts included low mood, loss of motivation and loss of identity whilst socially, participants missed the routine and social interaction and not having the freedom to swim.

“Low back pain is the number one cause of disability globally. The impact of pool closures on the ability for this group to keep active and manage their condition is so important.”

Dr Fiona Moffatt, associate professor at the University of Nottingham’s School of Health Sciences, supported the development of the Health and Wellbeing Benefits of Swimming report published by Swim England in 2017.

It was the largest scale review around the impact of swimming and wider aquatic activity on health.

Dr Moffatt said: “There are more than 20 million people in England living with long-term conditions that cannot be cured but which require ongoing support from health and social care services.

“For many, swimming and aquatic activity offers a safe and effective environment in which individuals can self-manage their physical and mental health – and improve symptom experience.

“Our previous work on The Health and Wellbeing Benefits of Swimming has demonstrated how the unique properties of water confer multiple benefits for individuals, communities and wider society.

“It is therefore critical that pools open – safely – at the earliest opportunity to ensure that these health benefits continue to be realised.”