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Like a fish in the water  
Streamline your stroke to swim like a snapper

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CREDIT: Reuters

Champion swimmers such as American Michael Phelps often take only 10 strokes to complete a 25-metre lap.

If your last swimming lesson was back when Mark Spitz ruled the pool, chances are your technique is a little rusty. To help update your stroke, take a look at the following tips, designed to make you look more like current swimming sensation Michael Phelps and less like someone in need of a lesson (or two). Not only will these suggestions bring your front crawl up to speed, you'll end up going farther and faster with less effort -- all important elements when you're trying to get the most out of your pool workout.

#### KEEP YOUR HEAD DOWN

You probably still remember your old swim instructor telling you to look ahead as you swim. Well, it's time to ignore that well-worn refrain. Nowadays, swimmers are told to look at the bottom of the pool, keeping the head in line with the spine and water flowing over the back of the head. Such a small change makes a big difference. Lowering your head raises the hips and makes the body more horizontal, which reduces drag. It also diminishes tension in the neck, making your stroke more comfortable over long distances.

#### SWIM DOWNHILL

Still can't stop your legs from sinking? Try this: Next time you do front crawl, press your chest toward the bottom of the pool, letting your head lower along with

it. This change in balance should encourage your legs to float to the surface, creating a more horizontal body position without the added effort of kicking harder.

### DON'T OVER-KICK

Creating a huge, rolling wave off the ends of your feet will do more to tire you out than get you to the other end of the pool faster. During front crawl, the prime objective of the kick is to keep your legs at the surface of the water --not to power you down the pool. In fact, the kick provides only about 30% of the propulsion. Kick just hard enough to keep your feet at the surface, which should result in less splash and less wasted effort.

### LET YOUR BODY ROLL

Good swimmers turn their whole body, not just their head, when they breathe. Not only does this simple move make breathing easier, it encourages moving the head and body as a unit instead of separately, which ultimately improves your stroke. Roll your body just enough so that you don't have to turn or lift your head to grab a breath. Then roll back on your stomach before repeating on the other side. This side-to-side roll is characteristic of swimmers who breathe seamlessly as they move up and down the pool.

### BREATHE EASILY

Once you have the hang of the body roll, it's time to work on your breathing mechanics, a common stumbling block among novice swimmers. First, don't be so anxious for oxygen that you breathe in more air than you have time to exhale. Instead, take a moderate-size breath and exhale underwater slowly and deliberately until your lungs are empty. Only then should you roll over on your side for the next breath. Take another moderate breath, and this time roll to the opposite side and repeat the slow and deliberate pattern of exhaling. Breathing on both your right and left sides takes practice, lots of practice. But once you get the hang of it, you'll be breathing easier and swimming better.

### COUNT YOUR STROKES

An efficient swimmer achieves maximum distance per stroke, which translates into travelling farther with less effort. At the opposite end of the scale is the swimmer whose arms splash and churn as they swim the length of the pool. The world's best take nine or 10 strokes to complete 25 metres. The average recreational swimmer's stroke count is somewhere closer to 20.

To determine your stroke count, count every hand entry from start to finish for one length of the pool. Once you know your stroke count, work on reducing it by one or two strokes at a time. Lengthening your stroke over and under the water

helps (simply gliding more and kicking off harder from the wall are cheating). So does a horizontal body position. In fact, all the factors outlined in this article build stroke efficiency and will eventually reduce your stroke count and increase your maximum distance per stroke.

## RELAX

The harder you fight the water, the more it fights back. So get rid of all the tension and splash in your stroke, and relax. Swim quietly, disturbing the water as little as possible. Think long, fluid motions, not short, choppy ones, and don't be afraid to slow down and feel the effect your new technique has on your stroke. Keep it up, and in a few weeks you'll look and feel totally different.

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