

The Secret to Teaching Butterfly to Older People



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Graham Dietrich is a swimming instructor who specialises in teaching adults to swim. He has created a successful revolutionary new way to teach adults to swim in one three-hour session. This is achieved by not just teaching the swimming movements but rather using a building block process that includes explanations and experiments in swimming so students understand what is required to be a swimmer.

Other Publications:

How to Teach an Adult to Swim in One Three Hour Session

Adult Learn to Swim Guide – For People with no Access to a Swim Instructor

Essential Ocean Swimming Skills You Can Practice in the Pool

Adult Learn to Swim - Home Practice before the First Pool Lesson

The Easiest Way to Swim in Clothes (or uniforms)

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The Secret to Teaching Butterfly to Older People

Occasionally, an older individual, often seeking a personal challenge, expresses interest in learning the butterfly stroke. While this is not a common request, it highlights a desire to master a skill perceived as particularly challenging and helps swimmers to complete the set of being able to swim the four major strokes.

More often than not, I hear them say, “Butterfly is too hard to learn at my age.” In some cases, they have attempted to learn the stroke but ended up exhausted from exerting too much effort without the necessary technique, strength or flexibility to execute it effectively.

The method outlined below provides a structured approach to teaching butterfly to older adults. It allows them to experience the satisfaction of learning a new and challenging skill without undue strain or fatigue



Before We Begin

This method relies on the assumption that 1) the person can swim freestyle and 2) there are no medical or physical conditions that limit movement or general health. The aim is to keep the technique as simple as possible to get them started.

Secret #1

The first two weeks of butterfly training are completed outside the pool.

The old saying, “Use it or lose it” is an essential piece of wisdom because most people in the older years didn’t wave their arms in big circles over their heads for most of their life, so they have lost the ability to do this easily. The amount of pivoting of the hips unfortunately has declined also.

Butterfly Student Exercises:

Exercise #1 Stand in front of a mirror and do VERY gentle large vertical circles keeping your arms straight. When the arms are extended up, they should be at least as wide as the shoulders (Y position). As hands pass the hips there should be a gap of about 20 cm.

You are trying to find the natural arm positions for this action so you do not feel pinching or pulling. Relax the neck and make it a shoulder action.

Start with five rotations and assess how your body feels. Gradually build up to 50 continuous rotations over a couple of weeks. This progression will help develop the flexibility and strength needed to complete a 25-metre lap. Once you feel confident with the movements, you can practice them anywhere—ideally in a setting where you feel comfortable, free from distractions and with no one wondering what on earth you are doing.

The key points are that this must be done gently and should flow without the feeling of getting ‘stuck’ at any point. Keep adjusting the circle until it flows easily.



Tweaking it to get the Butterfly stroke action: When your arms are fully extended up, pause for a second, slightly bend the elbows, then accelerate your arms down with the palms facing towards the ground.

Exercise #2

Stand up straight with your feet under your hips. Gently pivot your hips back and forth. Start with a few and build up to 50.

Exercise #3

Practice two hip pivots (thrusts) for every arm stroke. The first pivot is when the arms are at the top of the circle and the second pivot when the arms are coming down and nearly at the hips.

These three exercises teach the body the required actions and build the strength and flexibility required for butterfly.

Secret #2

When learning butterfly, ALL actions should be done in a gentle and relaxed way. Once the skills are mastered swimmers can put in a lot more effort in if they wish to go faster.

You will need a pool for this next section.

Exercise #4 With your arms extended out in front of you, as in exercise #1, push off from the side of the pool and glide on the surface of the water in the superman position. Repeat until you can glide in a relaxed manner, breathing out in the water as you go.

Exercise #5 Take a deep breath and with your arms extended in front of you in the Y position, or beside your hips, and test your dolphin kick. People often try and do great big dolphin kicks but we are looking for small gentle hip movements, and staying flat on the surface. When you need a breath, stop, and assess your progress. Keep practicing until your kick is relaxed and you have some forward momentum. Experiment with very fast light kicks and very slow light kicks.

Exercise #6 Walk in the pool and practice the butterfly arm stroke you have been practicing in the mirror. Practice at first with your head out of the water and then practice taking a breath and doing the stroke with your head in the water. Finally practice walking doing a stroke with your head in the water, then a stroke with it out for a breath and repeat with your head in and out of the water. The neck should stay in line with the spine and not tilt back on the breath strokes.



You need to feel the water as you pull your hands through it. You can increase this traction on the water by accelerating your hands as they move through the water.

Secret #3

A long glide after every stroke. This glide does two important things. 1) It gives the swimmer a short rest and 2) the natural buoyancy brings the swimmer back to the surface ready for the next stroke.

Especially after a breathing stroke the swimmer may be quite deep in the water and trying to do the butterfly recovery under water is very difficult. It is major point that the swimmer **not** try to do the recovery while still submerged, they need to be on or very near the surface.

Exercise #7 Putting it all together **without** a breath for four strokes and a very soft kick. The key now is a relaxed arm stroke, a relaxed dolphin kick and a long glide after each stroke. Try and stay near the surface of the water. Practice a gentle kick as your hands enter the water and another kick as they leave the water.

Secret #4

Most of the time, it is recommended that you slowly breathe out when your face is in the water. If you are having a little trouble with buoyancy and find yourself sinking a bit too much after the stroke, try holding your breath when your face is in the water and then rapidly breathe out just as you raise your head to come out of the water for the breath.

Exercise #8 Repeat exercise #7 but on every second stroke pop your head and shoulders out of the water for a breath. Remember to be breathing out when your face is in the water so the breath can be quick. I have also found that a little harder kick on this stroke helps you clear the water and give you a little more time for the breath.

Exercise #9 Single arm butterfly. This is a great drill for many reasons. Firstly, it is much easier than full butterfly, it is excellent for practicing the timing as you can work the kick with the arm action by saying, 'Kick in, Kick out' as the arm moves in and out the water.

With single arm butterfly the breathing can be to the side like in freestyle.

Experiment with:

Fast and slow strokes

Soft relaxed and strong strokes

Trying to get your head back in the water quickly.

Lifting your head just out of the water when you breathe.

Improving the Stroke

This guide is just the fundamentals so that you can swim a lap of butterfly. Once you can do this you can work on your technique with the aid of instructors and videos.

By gradually incorporating one or two laps of butterfly into each swim session, you'll soon develop the confidence and endurance to swim it with some degree of ease whenever you like.

Having Some Fun with Butterfly

I have what I call my 'old man's butterfly' because it is one I enjoy, and requires less effort with slower actions. In this relaxed butterfly, with each stroke, I dive a bit deeper, keep my arms out in front a bit longer and then use my buoyancy and a slightly stronger kick to come out of the water for a breath. I breathe on each stroke. I weave my way down the pool under and above the water.



The Use of Fins

Fins are often very popular with people learning Butterfly. It makes the kick easier and more effective. Despite this I prefer NOT to use Fins when teaching butterfly for the following reasons:

The fins give people an artificial impression that their fly kick is good and when the fins come off people often don't have much of a kick.

With older people, back issues are more common and fins can place more strain on the lower back.

We want to develop a soft kick and get our drive from our stroke. When wearing fins most of the propulsion comes from the kick, so when the fins come off, the butterfly fails.

Yoga Stretches for Butterfly



Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Karlyn Pipes for introducing me to her “FlutterFly” and showing me that butterfly can be enjoyed.

Free Booklet

I have put together a booklet on teaching adults to swim in one three-hour session. It has been remarkably successful in getting people swimming in a very short time. It is especially useful for people who have little access to regular sessions with swim instructors, people who need to learn to swim in a hurry, as well as very weak swimmers. If you would like a copy, email me at grahamdietrich@bigpond.com

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