

Socks or no socks?



Mike Alexander explores the options of what to wear on your feet for a swimrun

As swimmers we don't need to think about socks too much, except perhaps for how quickly they might warm our numb toes after a swim, but if you're taking on a swimrun, what comes between your skin and your trainers is worth careful consideration. Getting it wrong could result in a painful, race-ending experience.

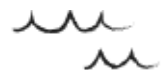
Here's what I've learned from more than six years of swimrun racing and experimenting with different options.

STANDARD RUNNING SOCKS

A standard pair of running socks is probably the cheapest and easiest way to start, as most of us have some stashed away in a cupboard. They tend to be lighter than the other options below and in most cases, will be adequate for your needs.

No matter how many functional textiles that are put into socks, it's rare that they will dry out completely between swims. So, if you're looking in your sock drawer for a solution, choose the least absorbent. Technical fibres tend to cope better with the repeated soaking and drying cycles than cotton. A snug fit helps too.

Note that very short, invisible or





ankle socks may be susceptible to ingress of grit and sand from the multiple transitions in swimrun.

COMPRESSION SOCKS

Knee-length compression socks are popular with many swimrunners as they serve more than one purpose. They provide support to your calves on long runs, protect your lower legs from



brambles and nettles, add warmth, and they can be used to store nutrition or carry a re-usable cup. Make sure you choose a pair that are tight enough to stay up when wet, but not so tight that they feel uncomfortable while running.

NEOPRENE SOCKS

I accidentally came across Alder Vapour Socks during a Beach Lifeguard course in Cornwall, in March, where they were a definite foot-saver! I subsequently used them in many swimrun races, although they have now been retired. While they are designed to be used with fins for snorkelling or scuba diving, I immediately thought that they could be well suited to swimrun. They are made from 2.5mm soft double-lined neoprene, which provides more warmth, buoyancy and cushioning than regular socks, and have an open heel so drain quickly. I also added a little hole to the front to allow water out.

The only negative I found was they'd occasionally collect little pebbles, although I only noticed this at Öttilö Isles of Scilly. In terms of weight, there's not much difference between a wet pair of compression socks and these. Depending on the fit you may want to remove the insole of your trainer. It's worth experimenting with different options. The built in "fin-saver" can be removed as it's surplus to requirements.

NO SOCKS

I'm always seeking minimalist solutions for a number of reasons including reduced weight, economy, and being close to nature. In addition, my feet are wide and get hot quickly so don't lend themselves to socks. I try to walk barefoot as much as possible and socially acceptable. So why not try going without socks for a swimrun, I thought?

I've tested this method up to the

45km mark, at Breca Coniston in 2017 (38.7km run, 6.5km swim), which went well. All I used was a dab of Vaseline on each heel. Originally this race was held in October which meant I'd had the whole season to toughen up my feet. I'm not so keen on this early in the season when my feet have just emerged from my winter slippers.

To toughen up your feet, and general foot care, there are some great tips at fixingyourfeet.com by John Vonhof. Mostly aimed at long-distance runners, hikers and adventure racers but much of the advice is applicable to swimrun too. I can also recommend his book.

If you are going to go down the no-sock route, make sure you do plenty of swimrun practice in the shoes you're going to race in to ensure you will be comfortable. I love this approach, but it is a considered one, and definitely a minority one. Like all gear choices, consider the course, conditions, and your body's current state.

TESTING

Whatever combination of socks and shoes you plan to use for swimrun, ensure you test them thoroughly in advance. That means testing them when they are wet. Fill a bowl with water and stand in it with your shoes (and socks) on, until soaked through, then go for a run 🏃

Mike Alexander is one of the most experienced swimrun athletes in the UK, competing in male and mixed category races across Europe including the Otillo World Series, the BRECA UK Championships & the LoveSwimRun Series. He is an experienced Level 2 Open Water Coach and Mountain Leader. He is passionate about swimrun and loves sharing what he has learnt. For more knowledge from the field, gear demo, and a mini-swimrun, check out Mike's [Introduction to Swimrun Workshop](#).