
Surfing - health benefits

Summary

Surfing originated in Hawaii. These days, people surf all over the world – wherever there is a wave. Australia has almost 40,000 kilometres of coastline, with many surf beaches. Surfers enjoy the physical benefits of paddling and surfing, being in the fresh air, as well as the overall benefits of surfing.

Health benefits of surfing

Surfing provides many health benefits including:

- cardiovascular fitness – from paddling
- shoulder and back strength – these muscles will strengthen from the paddling
- leg and core strength – once you're standing up on the board, strong legs and a strong core will keep you up.

Other benefits of surfing

Surfing provides a range of other benefits. It is:

- a great way to spend time outdoors and enjoy the natural environment
- a good outlet for stress and tension.

Getting started

Surfing is not as easy as it looks. It is worth taking some lessons to give you the basics and hopefully get you up on your feet.

As surfing involves the ocean, you should be a strong swimmer and always be aware of the safety aspects of being in the surf. If you are not sure about a suitable surfing spot, ask the local lifesavers or surfshop.

Having the right equipment is essential to get the best out of the surf. Your board should suit your body and your ability. For example, start with a long board as they are easier to stand up on, paddle and ride. Wear a wetsuit if necessary to keep you in the water long enough to learn.

Paddling your board

There are three main methods to use when you paddle your board in the water:

- Arm paddling – this mainly involves your arms. You need to position your body towards the nose of the board, keep your feet together and paddle with your arms using a freestyle swimming action (alternating your arms).
- Kick paddling – this mainly involves your legs. You need to slide your body to the back of the board so your legs are free to kick.
- Combination arm and kick paddling – this involves using both methods, which will help you to move more quickly.

Stand up paddling

Stand up paddling (SUP) brings together the skills of long boarding and paddling in a very dynamic way. Stand up paddlers stand on a board and use a long paddle to move through the water. The SUP boards have dimensions that are much larger than the everyday surfboard or long board and so the techniques to ride this equipment vary from it. Using the paddle adds another dimension to your surfing experience. As SUP is a new and developing discipline of surfing, the physical aspects to long-term participation are unknown at this stage. The health benefits and safety precautions are similar to surfing and long boarding, but SUP riders need to be aware that their equipment is larger and more dangerous to others in the surf. [

Surfing etiquette

Although surfing tends to be a fairly free sport and a mostly recreational activity, there are certain rules based on common sense that are important to consider, including:

- If someone is already riding a wave, don't try to paddle around them.
- The person closest to the breaking wave has right of way.
- Respect other riders' right of way.
- Share the surf and don't steal other riders' waves.
- Remember that surf board riders cannot surf in between the flags on a patrolled beach.
- Don't take it out on other people if you're having a bad day. Respect other people, their gear and their belongings. This applies not only in the water, but on the shore and in the car park.
- Always apologise and make sure that everyone is okay if you make a mistake and cause a collision.

Learning to read the ocean

The ocean environment is a relaxing place, but it can also be dangerous. You need to be able to identify the safe and dangerous spots. People getting caught in rips are the cause of most surf rescues. A rip is a strong current running out to sea. You need to know how to identify and avoid them.

Where there is a rip you will see:

- darker colours in the ocean (indicating deep water)
- murky brownish water caused by sand being stirred from the bottom of the ocean
- smoother surface with much smaller waves, alongside white water
- waves breaking further out to sea on both sides of a rip
- debris floating out to sea.

Enjoy surfing but at the same time be aware of rips, as they can pull a weak or tired swimmer out into deep water and into trouble.

Avoiding injury

Here are some tips to follow before you hit the waves:

- Check the beach and make sure you are not alone – take a friend.
- Look for any restrictions on the beach and follow them.
- If you are a beginner, stick to beach breaks with a sandy beach.
- Make sure the top of your board is waxed up or has some form of grip and check your leg rope is in good condition.
- Wear a leg rope tied to your surfboard if you are a beginner.
- Wear sunscreen, even on cloudy days.
- Wear what makes you comfortable, everyone has different tolerances for cold water. If you would like some protection from the cold, wear a wetsuit, steamer, booties, gloves or head gear.
- Watch the area before you go in to see the best place to paddle out. Watch other people to see how they are getting on out in the surf.
- Warm up before entering the water.

Where to get help

- Local surf lifesaving club
- Surfing Australia Tel. (02) 6674 9888
- Smartplay Tel. (03) 9674 8777

Things to remember

- Surfing has benefits for your health and overall wellbeing.

- You need to take care in the water at all times.
- Choose the equipment and the surf spot that's suitable for your ability and fitness.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

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