

Phase 3: Taper and peak

The taper is the finishing touch to get a swimmer to peak performance; it's the icing on the cake. All too often a good preparation is ruined by a poor taper. Usually, only one taper is done in a season, but if more are required, such as for an interclub, then state swim and/or national swim, the swimmer and coach have to determine priorities. There should only be one main taper. Every person will have an individual length of taper, so you need to experiment yourself.

Tapering 10 days to a week before an event is adequate; if it's a 'mini' taper, about 3 days before is sufficient. The taper is characterized by a long warm-up or loosen-up period, followed by a few short first swims at race speed with practice on starts and turns and a thorough cool-down. Remember this is the fine tuning phase and the other factors such as sleep, diet, stress, changes in work and environment need to be controlled. A suggested taper program is shown in Table 12.

Table 12 A suggested taper program

Intensity	Days before swim	Distance
No all out effort	1	no swimming, or only warm-up swimming
	2	
	3	starts, turns, relay changes, etc.
90% to 100% efforts for at least 25% program	4	no more than 1500 m
	5	race pace, distance of events shorter than distance swims
	6	longer rests — fewer repeats no more than 1800 m
	7	90% race pace, swim race distance and less: 50 m, 25 m
80% efforts	8	longer rests no more than 2000 m
	9	some overdistance swims higher intensity sprints: 50 m, 25 m
	10	longer rest periods
Some race pace		90% to 100% pace, many repeats, finish pulling work.

The general principles of the taper are:

- Individuals still have individual needs.
- At the beginning of the taper it may only be the distance that is reduced, say from 3000 m to 2000 m.
- As each day passes there is a reduction in distance as well as intensity, as the rest interval increases but a better quality of swim is achieved by a longer rest.

- All-out efforts should not be done within 3 days of the swim, as muscle glycogen stores will be depleted and not replaced in time. No all-out efforts over 50 m or 25 m in the last week.
- Alternate days with medium and hard workouts. If you are not sure whether to rest a swimmer or not, go for the rest.
- Practise every aspect of the race: the starts, finishes, turns, the last lap of the 200 m event. Practise the whole race. Even practise all the events in one day's swimming.
- Practise at race pace and faster than race pace (with shorter distances).
- Most of the distance covered should be in the warm-up and cool-down. For example over 1500 m: 400 m warm-up, 700 m sprints, 400 m cool-down.
- If swimmers are not training every day, then this doesn't matter, provided the step down is along the same lines.

Further tapers can be achieved — perhaps not to the same level — by a drop back to the phase 2 workouts if the events are more than 4 to 6 weeks apart. It's difficult to hold a taper for more than 3 weeks. Being tuned into your body's reactions is vital before attempting this. You must be aware of overtraining.

Phase 4: Deconditioning

You should not just stop swimming altogether once your goal event is over. This is both physiologically and psychologically undesirable. Deconditioning could also be a reconditioning phase for another taper. You have reached prime condition: why just throw it away?

Now is the time to put more fun into your swimming. You are fit and other swims will not be such an effort. Why not work on some awards if you have been concentrating on sprint events, or try some other stroke? The 800 m butterfly or the Iron Person Awards may be attractive. While the pressure of preparation is off, experiment and you may even find you swim better — this could tell a story about your training schedule. You will be back to swims of 2000 m to 4000 m perhaps, working at 60 to 70 per cent effort. It's probably getting into winter again and suitable pools may be difficult to find, so if you feel like a change of exercise type and pace, try something new. This becomes phase 5.

Phase 5: Maintenance

You can supplement swimming with other activities: winter sports, jogging, aerobic dancing, etc. The human body needs a change and you will be better for it both physically and mentally. This doesn't mean drop all exercise completely but it may mean you take a break from the water. You might even do some lifesaving awards or play water polo. If you stop exercising for more than 3 weeks, however, you will need to start again slowly on a preconditioning phase — it takes as little as 3 weeks to lose fitness, so it's easier to maintain fitness all year round than start again, also it is a healthier approach to life.