

# Buying a Wetsuit

Along with a bike and running shoes, the wetsuit completes the basic tri essentials triumvirate. **Nicola Joyce** shows you how to buy your first...



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**W**etsuits keep you warm and buoyant and make the swim leg of your race quicker and easier. British Triathlon Federation (BTF) rules state that it's compulsory to wear a wetsuit if water temperature is 14°C or lower (and optional if water temperature is between 15-21°C). But, like bikes and shoes, there's a mind-boggling array of makes and models to choose from. So what should you be looking for to see you through the 2009 season in style?

## For your consideration

When choosing, the obvious factors are height, weight and gender (wetsuits come in men's and women's sizes). Price-wise, you're looking at about £100 for an entry-level suit and up to and beyond £400 for a top-end one.

Before heading to the shops, factor in the following: have you considered hiring or even buying an ex-rental suit? What's your budget? How often will you use it? (If most of your races feature pool swims, prioritise spending big on other kit.) How thick should your suit be? (Wetsuits come in all shapes and sizes – do your legs need extra buoyancy, or do you need less restriction around the shoulders?) What distance will you be swimming in the suit? (Comfort will be extra important for longer-distance swims.)

Your first stop should be your local tri shop. The staff will advise you on the best suit to fit both your budget and body, and will suggest the level of suit needed. Take a swim suit or tri kit to wear while you try suits on. Some triathlon shops have an Endless Pool, allowing you to swim in the suits. A triathlon wetsuit should be tight, although not restrictive around the neck. For easy access, a top tip is to put your foot in a carrier bag before you try getting into the leg holes.

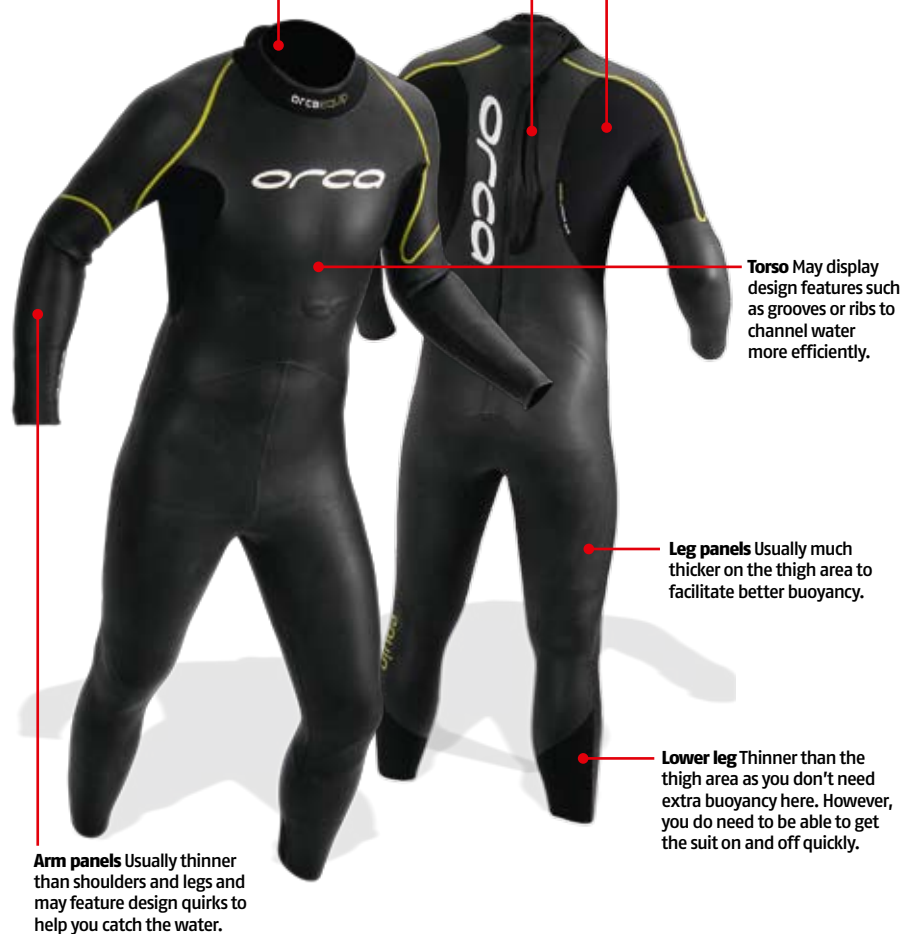
## Beginners' alternatives

If you're unconvinced about the merits of throwing cash at a suit just yet, there are cheaper options. Many tri shops offer a wetsuit hire service, or you can purchase an

**Neck** The neck-opening of the wetsuit should be soft so it doesn't rub. The neoprene will be thinner than in the rest of the suit.

**Zipper** Usually fastens upwards, is covered along its length and ends in a secure flap. The pull cord will be long for easy removal.

**Shoulder panels** Neoprene thickness can vary greatly. Better swimmers may look for thinner shoulder panels for more range of movement.



**Torso** May display design features such as grooves or ribs to channel water more efficiently.

**Leg panels** Usually much thicker on the thigh area to facilitate better buoyancy.

**Lower leg** Thinner than the thigh area as you don't need extra buoyancy here. However, you do need to be able to get the suit on and off quickly.

**Arm panels** Usually thinner than shoulders and legs and may feature design quirks to help you catch the water.

ex-hire suit for considerably cheaper than the cost of a brand-new one. You can hire a wetsuit for a week (suitable for a training session and race) or a month, and there's rarely much of a price difference between the two options (likely to be around £50). By hiring a suit, you get to try before you buy and can fine tune your eventual purchase.

Once you've got your shiny new suit home, do look after it. Always rinse in cold, fresh water after use, hang up on a sturdy coat-hanger to dry, then store somewhere dry and cool. Repair any nicks or tears when you notice them (you can buy special neoprene glue) and, over the winter, check the suit once or twice for any damage. **220**

## When to upgrade

With new wetsuits on the market every season, the temptation to upgrade is great. But beyond the desire for new kit, when should you buy another suit? Obviously, if your wetsuit sustains damage that can't be fixed with glue or a manufacturer's repair, you need a replacement. If your body shape changes significantly (either way!), and the suit no longer fits properly, you'll need a new one. Finally, if your swimming improves dramatically, you could consider a new suit. Better swimmers tend to prefer thinner suits and more flexible shoulder panels, while novice swimmers often find the extra buoyancy of thicker suits helpful.