



COLD WATER SURVIVAL

Cold Water

What is it? It is difficult even for an expert to define. It is estimated to be around and under the temperature of 70 degrees. However, this will vary in each case due to the specific circumstances and physical condition of the person involved.

What Happens In Cold Water?

What happens to the body when suddenly plunged into cold water? The first hazards to contend with are panic and shock. The initial shock can place severe strain on the body, producing instant cardiac arrest, as happened to a 15 year old scout in the month of March in Pennsylvania several years ago.

Survivors of cold water accidents have reported the breath driven from them on first impact with the water. Should your face be in the water during that first involuntary gasp for breath, it may well be water rather than air. Total disorientation may occur after cold water immersion. Persons have reported "thrashing helplessly in the water" for thirty seconds or more until they were able to get their bearings.

Immersion in cold water can quickly numb the extremities to the point of uselessness. Cold hands cannot fasten the straps of a lifejacket, grasp a thrown rescue line, or hold onto an over-turned boat. Within minutes, severe pain clouds rational thought. And, finally, hypothermia (exposure) sets in, and without rescue and proper first aid treatment, unconsciousness and death. We all recall the incident in which the airliner went down in the dead of winter in the water in Washington, D.C. several years ago. The vivid video of the rescue attempts and those that died due to hypothermia is not easily forgotten.

Normal body temperature, of course, is 98.6°. Shivering and the sensation of cold can begin when the body temperature lowers to approximately 96.5°. Amnesia can begin to set in at approximately 94°, unconsciousness at 86° and death at approximately 79°.

What To Do In The Water

Cold water robs the body's heat 32 times faster than cold air. If you should fall into the water, all efforts should be given to getting out of the water by the fastest means possible.

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Persons boating in the cold water months should be thoroughly skilled in rescue and self-rescue techniques.

Physical exercise such as swimming causes the body to lose heat at a much faster rate than remaining still in the water. Blood is pumped to the extremities and quickly cooled. Few people can swim a mile in fifty degree water. Should you find yourself in cold water and are not able to get out, you will be faced with a critical choice — to adopt a defensive posture in the water to conserve heat and wait for rescue, or attempt to swim to safety.

Should you find yourself in the water, avoid panic. Air trapped in clothing can provide buoyancy as long as you remain still in the water. Swimming or treading water will greatly increase heat loss and can shorten survival time by more than 50%. The major body heat loss areas are the head, neck, armpits, chest and groin.

First Aid Considerations For Cold Water Victims

Treatment for hypothermia depends on the condition of the person. Mild hypothermia victims who show only symptoms of shivering and are capable of rational conversation may only require removal of wet clothes and replacement with dry clothes or blankets.

In more severe cases where the victim is semi-conscious, immediate steps must be taken to begin the re-warming process.

- Get the person out of the water and into a warm environment. Remove the clothing only if it can be done with a minimum of movement of the victim's body. Do not massage the extremities.
- Lay the semi-conscious person face up, with the head slightly lowered, unless vomiting occurs. The head down position allows more blood to flow to the brain.
- Immediately attempt to re-warm the victim's body core.
- Call 911.