



How to Survive in Cold Water

Information provided by the U.S. Coast Guard and
Sagamore Rowing Association

First let's address what happens when a person finds himself in cold water. The initial shock can place a severe strain on the body. Panic and shock can produce cardiac arrest. Secondly, disorientation can take place. It has been reported by several people that "thrashing helplessly in the water" will take place for several seconds until they are able to get their bearings. Immersion in cold water can also quickly numb the extremities to a point of uselessness. This makes it difficult to grab a hold of things such as your boat, ropes or your life jacket. Within minutes, severe pain disrupts all rational thinking. Soon after hypothermia sets in and without rescue and proper first aid, unconsciousness and death are not far behind.

So what is hypothermia anyway? It is the rapid loss of your body temperature. The sudden immersion into cold water cools your skin and outer tissue 25 to 30 times faster than air. Within 10 to 15 minutes your core body temperature (necessary for the proper functioning of your brain, spinal cord, heart and lungs) begins to drop. Within minutes you can be dead.

So how do you survive in cold water? Well there are several things you should know to prevent your death or someone else's. One thing to remember is that your body has 5 "hot spots". They are places on the body that for specific reasons you lose great quantities of body heat. The "hot spots" are your head and neck, the two sides of your chest (under your arms), and the groin area. These areas should be well protected when out paddling.

When you find yourself dumped into cold water remember DON'T PANIC!!!! Calmly follow the procedure below. These simple steps should increase your survival time. Firstly, do not remove your clothing. Instead, button, zip buckle and tighten all collars, cuffs, shoes and hoods. Cover your head if possible. A layer of water trapped between you and your clothes will heat up with your body heat and use itself as insulation. Put on your PFD (lifejacket). Secondly, get yourself out of the water. Right your boat if possible but if not, climb on top of it. Climb on anything else that is floating near by such as a log. Only try to swim to shore if you are within 10 feet and the current is not swift. Swimming will cause your insulation water to be pumped out from between you and your clothes. It will also cause blood to rush to your arms and legs causing additional heat loss. This could reduce your survival time by almost 50%. If you cannot get yourself out of the water hold your knees to your chest, wrap your arms around your knees and clasp your hands together. Lastly, remain as still as possible. Intense pain and shivering will start to take place but if you can avoid any movement you will be able to save heat, maybe saving your life.

When paddling in a race you might want to keep an eye out for anyone who has "gone for a swim" to make sure they haven't become hypothermic. There are several symptoms to watch out for; intense shivering, loss of coordination, mental confusion, cold/blue skin, weak pulse, irregular heartbeat, and enlarged pupils. There are also some pretty simple things you can do that might save someone's life. First things first, when the person stops shivering their body temperature drops rapidly so time will be of the essence. First gently move the victim to a warm shelter. Check breathing and heartbeat. If necessary, and if you know how to administer CPR, start CPR. Remove the victim's clothes with minimum body movement. Lay the unconscious or semi-conscious victim in a level face up position with some sort of insulation underneath them (like a blanket). Wrap the victim in a blanket or anything that is warm and dry. If there is nothing around, use yourself as a blanket as your body heat would be enough. If you have them around, use heating pads or hot water bottles and place them around the victim's "hot spots". DO NOT... apply heat to arms and legs, massage the victim or place them in a hot bath. Also, and most importantly don't feed the victim or give them any alcohol.