



Surviving Sudden Cold Water Immersion

“Cold water” doesn’t have to be as cold as you might think to harm you. Water is generally considered cold at **21°C (69°F)**, but if you are in it for a long period of time, water as warm as **27°C (80°F)** can have adverse effects on the body. Make no mistake, even in July and August all tidal waters are cold. And cold water can kill!

For this reason, it is important to understand what happens to your body when it is exposed to cold water, and what measures can be taken to increase your chances of survival.

What happens in cold water?

Upon unexpected (and it usually is) immersion into cold water, the first hazards to contend with are panic and shock. The initial shock can place severe strain on the body, and sometimes produces instant cardiac arrest and unconsciousness.

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

Cold water robs the body’s heat 27 times faster than cold air. It can quickly numb the extremities (arms and legs) to the point of uselessness. Cold hands cannot fasten the straps of a lifejacket or Personal Floatation Device (PFD), grasp a rescue line, or hold onto an over-turned boat. Within minutes hypothermia sets in and severe pain clouds rational thought. Unconsciousness and possible death will follow if proper first aid treatment is not administered.

What to do in cold water.

If you fall into the water, it is critical that you remain calm. Physical activity as a result of panic causes the body to lose heat at a much faster rate than remaining calm in the water. All efforts should be given to getting out of the water by the fastest means possible. Most man-overboard incidents involve open boats that, even when filled with water, will support the weight of its occupants. If the boat has capsized and cannot be made right, climb on top of it.

If you find yourself in cold water and are unable to get out, you will be faced with a critical choice – attempt to swim to safety or adopt a defensive posture in the water to conserve heat and wait for rescue. Remember – few people, even strong swimmers, can swim a mile in water that is 10°C. Swimming and/or treading water greatly increases heat loss, and can shorten survival time by 50%.

If you are alone and wearing an approved PFD, it is recommended that you slow down body heat loss by using the **Heat Escape Lessening Position (HELP)**.

Cross your arms tightly against your chest and draw your knees up. Remain calm and still. Do not try to swim. Unnecessary movement will use energy that your body requires to survive. Practice the HELP position in warm water.

If you are with other people wearing PFDs, everyone should “**HUDDLE**”.

Huddle with everyone’s chests and sides close together. Intertwine legs and extend your arms around the people next to you.



Preparation for cold water immersion.

The ability of an approved PFD to increase your chances of surviving cold water immersion cannot be stressed enough. Wearing an approved PFD while on deck will greatly increase your chances of survival should you unexpectedly find yourself in the water.

Likewise, in a situation where you have time to prepare for entry into cold water, donning an immersion/survival suit will lessen the effects of cold water, and significantly increase your likelihood of survival. Once in the water it is critical that you remain calm, know what to expect from cold water immersion, and be prepared to respond in an appropriate manner.

Proper preparation, training and knowledge are essential for surviving sudden cold water immersion. Marine Emergency Duties (MED) training prepares harvesters for all aspects of emergency response, including cold water immersion – what to expect and how to respond. Such preparation will enable you to make calculated decisions that could ultimately save your life.