



## Cold water and hypothermia

No matter how good a swimmer you are, sudden unexpected immersion in cold water can cause an initial cold shock that affects muscular co-ordination and impairs the ability to swim. Heat loss from immersion can quickly cause hypothermia. Any of these factors can lead to drowning.

Everyone has a responsibility to assess and manage the risk of immersion in cold water and to know what to do if it occurs.

### Expectations

**Everyone** is expected to:

- Have studied the effects by completing the British Rowing Cold Water & Hypothermia online learning module and the Safety Alert – Cold Water Kills
- Know and watch for the symptoms of mild hypothermia (such as complaints of feeling cold and tired, poor comprehension, disorientation, poor concentration, irrational behaviour, violent outbursts and confusion)
- Understand the effects of cold water immersion and hypothermia
- Be prepared for those effects if immersed in cold water
- Wear clothing appropriate to the conditions; (see Keep warm and Introduction to Coxing and Steering online learning for those involved in coxing)
- Report incidents to the club and British Rowing

### Links:

- **Cold Water & Hypothermia** online module - [rowhow.org/free/cold water course latest version](http://rowhow.org/free/cold%20water%20course%20latest%20version)
- **Keep Warm Safety Article** - [britishrowing.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Keep-warm.pdf](http://britishrowing.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Keep-warm.pdf)
- **Introduction to Coxing/Steering online learning** - [rowhow.org/course/view.php?id=144](http://rowhow.org/course/view.php?id=144)
- **British Rowing Incident Reporting System** - [incidentreporting.britishrowing.org](http://incidentreporting.britishrowing.org)  
(also *Dolphin incident report*)
- **Safety Alert - Cold Water Kills**, <https://www.britishrowing.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Safety-Alert-Cold-Water-Kills-1.pdf>
- **Safety Alert Archive** - [britishrowing.org/knowledge/safety/safety-alert-archive](http://britishrowing.org/knowledge/safety/safety-alert-archive)

## Hypothermia

### “Stumbles, Mumbles and Umbles”

- Symptoms of hypothermia depend on how cold the environment is length of exposure
- Severe hypothermia needs urgent hospital treatment
- Shivering guide: if the person can stop shivering on their own, the hypothermia is mild, but if they cannot stop shivering, it is moderate to severe

**In mild cases** symptoms include:

- shivering
- feeling cold
- low energy
- discomfort at higher temperatures than normal/cold, pale skin

**In moderate cases** symptoms include:

- violent, uncontrollable shivering
- being unable to think/pay attention
- confusion (some people don't realise they are affected)
- loss of judgment/reasoning
- difficulty moving around/stumbling (weakness)
- feeling afraid/memory loss
- fumbling hands/loss of coordination/drowsiness
- slurred speech/listlessness/indifference □
- slow, shallow breathing/weak pulse

**In severe cases** symptoms include:

- loss of control of hands/feet/limbs
- uncontrollable shivering that suddenly stops
- unconsciousness
- shallow/no breathing
- weak/irregular/no pulse
- stiff muscles/dilated pupils

Although hypothermia is defined as occurring when the body temperature drops below 35°C (95°F), mild hypothermia can start at higher body temperatures.

As the body temperature decreases further, shivering will stop completely. The heart rate will slow and a person will gradually lose consciousness. When unconscious, a person will not appear to have a pulse or be breathing. Emergency assistance should be sought immediately and CPR provided while the person is warmed. CPR is an emergency procedure, consisting of 30 chest compression followed by 2 rescue breaths

### **Treating hypothermia**

As hypothermia can be a life-threatening condition, seek medical attention as soon as possible. Hypothermia is treated by preventing further heat being lost and by gently warming the patient. If you are treating someone with mild hypothermia, or waiting for medical treatment to arrive, follow the advice below to prevent further loss of heat.

### **Things to do for hypothermia:**

- It is important to handle anyone that has hypothermia very gently and carefully.
- Move the person indoors/somewhere warm, as soon as possible
- Once sheltered, gently remove any wet clothing and dry the person
- Lie the person down on something dry/warm

- Wrap them in blankets, towels, coats etc... protecting the head and torso first
- Your own body heat can help; lie beside them/hug them gently
- Do not rub the person's body
- Increase activity gently if possible, but not to the point where sweating occurs, as that cools the skin down again
- If possible, give the person a warm drinks (**not** alcohol) or high energy food, such as chocolate, to help warm them up
- Once body temperature has increased, keep the person warm and dry

**Things you should NOT do:**

- Don't stand them up/let them stand up. Keep the head down and the body horizontal as on a stretcher and parallel with the ground
- Don't warm up an elderly person using a bath, as this may send cold blood from the body's surfaces to the heart or brain too suddenly, causing a stroke or heart attack
- Don't apply direct heat (e.g. hot water or a heating pad) to the arms/legs, as this forces cold blood back to the major organs, making the condition worse
- Don't give the person any alcohol; this will decrease the body's ability to retain heat
- Don't rub/massage the person's skin; this can cause the blood vessels to widen and decrease the body's ability to retain heat.