

# Tips to improve cold-water survival



Anyone who's ever fallen or jumped into chilly water knows how it can instantly knock the breath out of you. While drowning is the first danger that pops to mind, hypothermia – a lowering of the body's core temperature – poses an equal risk to persons suddenly immersed in cold water.

Myths about cold-water survival abound. Among them: treading water to stay warm, pulling off clothes and shoes to keep from sinking, using the face-down floating technique called “drown-proofing,” and trying to swim to shore. All have been documented to *reduce* survival time.

Experts agree that, compared with other techniques, you can as much as **double** survival time after a plunge into 50-degree water by wearing a life jacket and assuming a heat-conserving posture.\*

Here's what you *should* do if you fall overboard:

- Relax and allow your life jacket to keep you afloat. Kicking and flailing accelerates loss of body heat because blood pumps to your extremities.
- Try to get back in the boat. If it's overturned, try to right it. If you can't, crawl on top of it. By getting as much of yourself out of the water as you can, you minimize heat loss.
- Keep your clothes on. Tighten your life jacket, collars, and cuffs. You lose 50% of your body heat through your head, so pull your hood tight. Air trapped inside clothing also gives added buoyancy and clothes help insulate you.

- If you can't get any part of your body out of the water, “sit” in the water with your head raised, pull your knees up, and fold your arms across your chest. If more than one person has fallen overboard, huddle together (with arms around each other and legs dangling) to maintain body heat. Put children and smaller people in the center. Heavy people cool more slowly than thin ones; children cool more quickly than adults.

Wearing a life jacket is more than just a good idea; it's the law in Washington for all children under age 13 when riding in boats 19 feet or less. You can learn more about choosing the right life jackets for you and your guests at [www.boatwashington.org/lifejacket.htm](http://www.boatwashington.org/lifejacket.htm) and find tips on safe boating at [www.boated.com](http://www.boated.com).

## Snug-fit quick tip

To test the fit of a child's life jacket, strap it on and pick up the child by the life jacket's shoulders. If it's a good fit, the child's chin and ears won't slip through.

*(continued)*

## First aid for hypothermia victims

Hypothermia treatment depends on the person's condition. For mild hypothermia (victims who are shivering and speaking rationally), remove their wet clothes and replace them with dry clothes or warm blankets.

In more severe cases where the victim is semiconscious, immediately get the person into a warm environment. Remove the victim's clothing only if you can do it without moving his or her body too much. *Don't massage the extremities!* That could force cold blood into the rest of the body. Never give alcohol to a hypothermia victim. Lay the person face up with the head slightly lowered, unless you suspect the person may vomit. The head-down position allows more blood to flow to the brain.

If necessary, use CPR (if you're CPR-trained). Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation will help the victim breathe and re-warm the lungs. It may be possible to revive a person who's been in water for a considerable time and shows no signs of life. Many nearly drowned people who've been pulled out of the water show typical symptoms of death: blue skin, no detectable breathing, no apparent pulse, and pupils fully dilated.

Immediately begin to warm the victim's body core, not the arms and legs, in a tub of hot water (105 to 110 degrees). Or apply hot, wet towels or blankets to the victim's head, neck, chest, groin, and abdomen. If nothing else is available, use your own body heat to warm a hypothermia victim by removing both your clothing and the victim's, then getting inside a sleeping bag or wrapping yourselves together in a blanket.

*\*Experts predict survival time with no flotation device as 1.5 hours using the "drown-proofing" technique and 2 hours treading water. With a flotation device, predicted survival times peg at 2 hours while swimming, 2.7 hours holding still, 4 hours huddled with other people, and 4 hours floating in a crouched position with your head and neck out of the water.*

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