

Preventing Hypothermia

Tips from Boat U.S. Foundation for Boating Safety and Clean Water

"Cold water robs the body of heat 25-30 times faster than air," said Ruth Wood, director of the BoatU.S. Foundation for Boating Safety and Clean Water. "When someone falls overboard, their core temperature begins to drop within 10-15 minutes. And the water doesn't have to be icy — it just has to be colder than you are to cause hypothermia," she said.

The more energy someone spends after going overboard, the more quickly their body temperature drops, reducing their survival time. Wearing a life jacket adds to survival time in the water, not only by minimizing motion needed to keep afloat, but also by helping insulate the body, Wood said.

"If you suddenly find yourself in the water, don't panic," she said, "because flailing around causes your body to lose heat a lot more quickly." Heads, necks, sides of the chest and groins are the body "hot spots" that lose heat most quickly and need to be protected the most. The best way to prevent hypothermia is to stay in the boat, but should you fall overboard, these tips can help you survive:

- Don't take off your clothes. Instead, button, buckle, zip and tighten collars, cuffs, shoes and hoods. If possible, cover your head — in cold water about half of heat loss comes from the head.
- Devote all your efforts to getting out of the water. Act quickly before you lose full use of your hands.
- Board a boat, raft, or anything floating. Turn a capsized boat over and climb in; remember most boats will support you even when full of water. If you can't right the boat, climb on top of it.
- Don't try to swim, unless it is to reach a nearby boat, another person or a floating object you can climb or lean on. By releasing warm water between your clothing and your body and sending "warm" blood to your extremities, swimming can cut your survival time by as much as 50 percent.
- Even if it's painful, remain as still as possible. Intense shivering and severe pain in cold water are natural body reflexes. These will not kill you, but heat loss will.
- If you're with other people, huddle together for warmth. Otherwise, hold your knees to your chest to protect your trunk from heat loss, and clasp your arms around your calves.
- For a free brochure about preventing and treating hypothermia, call the BoatU.S. Foundation for Boating Safety and Clean Water at 1-800-336-2628 or order a copy online at www.BoatUS.com

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