Cold Water Shock and Hypothermia

October 2026

Water temperatures of less than 70°F can be dangerous. Cold water temperatures increase our chances of experiencing cold water shock and hypothermia.

If you need help accessing or understanding this information, contact AHS.VDHInjuryandViolencePreventionProgram@vermont.gov.

What is Cold Water Shock?



- Cold water shock is our body's response to sudden cold water immersion. It can happen to anyone, even the best swimmers.
- Cold water shock can happen within seconds of being in cold water.
- The sudden shock can cause fast, shallow breathing and panic, this may lead to breathing water into your lungs and make you drown.
- It can also lead to loss of control of your arms, legs, hands, and feet making it impossible to swim or get to safety.
- Another common side effect is a faster heart rate and higher blood pressure. This can increase the risk of a heart attack.

What is Hypothermia?



- Hypothermia happens when your body temperature drops below 95°F.
- Signs of hypothermia include shivering, exhaustion, confusion, drowsiness, and slurred speech.
- Be aware that even after you get out of the water your body temperature can continue to drop.

The Role of Water and Air Temperature



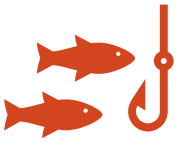
- Even on a warm day, water temperature of less than 70°F can increase your risk for cold water shock and hypothermia.
- On a cooler day, know that your body temperature can drop when exposed to cold air after you exit the water.
- It takes a long time for water temperature to heat up in Vermont! Water temperatures in many bodies of water reach 70°F in July.

What Swimmers Should Know



- Before you swim, know the signs of cold water shock and hypothermia.
- Pay close attention for rapid breathing, uncontrollable shivering, loss of limb control and coordination, and loss of feeling or numbness anywhere on your body. If you experience these symptoms, get out of the water.
- If your heart rate feels rapid or uncomfortable get out of the water.
- Enter water slowly to reduce chance of cold water shock.
- Take frequent warming breaks with dry towels and warm liquids.
- For all water activities, consider wearing a wet suit or dry suit to provide your body with additional insultation.

Tips for Other Water Activities



- If you are going to be out on the water from November 1 through May 1, wear a life jacket, it's the law!
- A lifejacket can keep you afloat if you end up in the water and experience cold water shock.
- Life jackets come in many shapes and sizes specific to your water activity. Check out U.S. Coast Guard approved personal floatation device options to choose what works best for you.
- Always tell someone when you will be out on the water and update them on any changes to your plans.
- If possible, try not to be out on the water alone, especially when the water temperature is cold.

Be Ready for an Emergency



- If someone is in trouble or a loved one does not return from a water activity call 9-1-1 immediately.
- If you are witnessing an emergency, watch the person until help arrives and try to throw them a rescue floatation device if available.
- Never enter cold water to rescue someone. You could also go into cold water shock.
- Before water activities, learn cold water shock and hypothermia first aid.