

## Important Ice and Cold Water Safety Tips



Winter comes and goes with flurries of snow, ice, and cold water each year– three things nobody should ever take lightly. Whether you plan to be near the water or not, cold water can be dangerous, especially if you are unprepared.

Winter activities like ice skating, ice-fishing, and boating are fun, but to keep them enjoyable, your safety should always be your number one priority. [Knowing what can happen](#) if you fall into cold water and what to do in those first few seconds could save you or your loved one’s life.

### Why Cold Water Can Be Dangerous

When you go outside on a warmer-than-usual winter day, you might not think the water will be as cold, but air temperatures can be deceiving.

Any water temperature below 70°F should be treated cautiously, and cold shock can begin at temperatures between 50-60°F.

Cold water can cause the body to lose four times more heat than cold air. Therefore, when someone hits cold water, their body begins to go into “cold shock,” causing dramatic changes like involuntary gasps, rapid breathing, a heart rate and blood pressure spike, and reduced mental capabilities.

## **Cold shock comes in three main phases:**

### *1. The Gasp:*

Cold water immersion can trigger the “[gasp factor](#),” making breathing difficult. Water can fill the lungs if your head gets submerged when the “gasp factor” happens.

### *2. Body Exhaustion:*

Loss of muscular control and overall body weakness in the limbs, hands, and feet can be felt within seconds. The longer in cold water, the more severe the symptoms become. When the body becomes weak, it is harder to stay floating without assistance.

### *3. Hypothermia:*

[Hypothermia](#) is the extreme lowering of core body temperature and can be dangerous if not treated. For example, having your core body temperature drop below 95°F may result in unconsciousness and death.

Depending on the temperature of the water, minimizing the time you are in the water is essential. Therefore, if you are going to be on/near cold water or ice, it is always best to be adequately prepared if you or a loved one falls in.



## Cold Water Safety Tips:

Whenever you go on a winter outing, always prepare as if you are going to fall into cold water.

The following cold water safety tips will help you keep you and your loved ones safe around cold water this winter:

### **4 Essential Cold Water Safety Tips:**

1. Check the weather and water conditions before you go out. You will want to dress for the water temperature, not the air temperature. Some examples include:
  - Wet Suit
  - Dry Suit
  - Immersion Suit
  - Survival Suit
  - Exposure Coveralls
2. Always wear a brightly colored USCG-approved [life jacket](#).
3. Bring a communication device like a cell phone, position-indicating radio Beacon (EPIRB), personal locator beacon (PLB), or a VHF radio.
4. Communicate your location, supplies, and plans with someone you trust on land.

### **If You Fall into Cold Water Safety Tips:**

- Hold your hands over your mouth to prevent gasping in cold water.
- Try to stay calm and control your breathing.
- Assess your surroundings and devise a plan to get to safety.
- Minimize your time in the water by doing 10 minutes of meaningful movement to safety.
- If you can't find a place to swim to get to safety, use the H.E.L.P position, or if you are with a group, the Huddle Position until help can arrive.

### **H.E.L.P Position:**

Draw your knees to your chin and keep your legs together.



### **Huddle Position:**

Form a huddle with other people to lessen body heat loss.



### **After Rescue Cold Water Safety Tips:**

After a person is rescued from cold water, their body temperature will continue to drop. Seconds count even after getting someone out of cold water. Here are some helpful steps to take after a cold rescue:

- Call 911 immediately.
- Get to a warm place and begin actively trying to warm up as you monitor breathing and blood circulation.
- Remove any wet clothing and wrap them or yourself in blankets or new dry clothing.
- The core should be warmed first, then other limbs like hands and feet.
- Avoid warming up too quickly, and DO NOT go into warm water. Warming up too quickly can cause an irregular heart rate.

## Ice Safety Tips

Ice can be tricky and is [never 100% safe](#). Typically, ice only sometimes freezes uniformly in one location, so it's essential always to have a plan prepared before going on or around the ice.

### **General Safety Around Ice:**

- Always check the temperature outside. Air temperatures can often impact the quality of ice. You will always want to dress for the water temperature rather than the air temperature.
- Always wear a brightly colored USCG-approved life jacket. Lifejackets will help you stay afloat when the stages of cold shock begin.
- Check the ice thickness in multiple areas. [General ice thickness guidelines](#) recommend that a minimum of 4" of clear ice is safe for activities on foot.
- Go with a buddy & share with others your activity plans, including what supplies you are taking, your location, and the personal location devices you have with you.
- Bring an ice safety kit that includes rope, ice picks, a whistle, a cell phone or VHF radio, spiked shoes, an emergency first aid kit, extra clothes, and blankets.

### **If YOU Fall Through the Ice:**

- Remain calm and avoid panicking.
- Face the direction you came and spread your arms out on the unbroken ice.
- Begin kicking your feet and try to pull yourself onto the ice.
- Once you pull yourself out of cold water, remain lying on the ice, but do not stand!
- Roll away from the hole and crawl as carefully as possible to solid land.
- Treat yourself for hypothermia and seek medical attention immediately.

### **If Someone Falls Through Ice:**

- Call 911 immediately.
- Reach, Throw, or Row; never go out on broken ice!
  - Reach: If you can reach them safely on solid ground, extend an object such as a rope, a tree branch, or a ladder. If you cannot hold their weight, release your grip and find a different approach.

- Throw: Toss an end of a rope or a floating device to tie around themselves before phase 2 of cold shock begins.
- Row: If the ice is completely broken apart and can hold a small row boat to reach the victim. Use the paddle to pull them aboard.
- Help the person into dry clothes or a blanket ASAP.
- Seek immediate medical attention after rescue.



Ice Rescue with First Responders

### Always Know and Practice Cold Water Safety During the Winter

After reading these tips and educating yourself on the hazards of cold water, you and your loved ones will be better prepared for any winter outing, whether you are near the water or not.

Regardless of the water temperature, you should always know about the water's dangers and understand how to counteract them, especially by using the [5 Layers of Protection](#).

All layers of protection must work together to help prevent the tragedy of drowning. [Water safety isn't just during swim time](#). It is a year-long practice!

For more information about water safety and the 5 Layers of Protection, become a [Water Safety Champion](#) today!