

Newspaper Article 10: Hypothermia

It's probably heresy for us southerners to talk about cold weather and cold water. However, while our season is short, the water and air do get cold, and that combination can become deadly without proper care.

Hypothermia is defined as "subnormal temperature of the body". While the condition can happen whenever the air or water is cold enough that the body cannot maintain its normal temperature, we will be addressing hypothermia as it relates to our boating – and on our lake.

Obviously, the colder the water and air the quicker and deeper the problem. A cold rain with windy conditions will quickly lower body temperatures unless protective clothing is worn. In the Coast Guard whenever the water temperature is 60 degrees or less and the air temperature is 50 degrees or less we must wear special protective suits. If they are not available, we cannot be on the water.

Lake Thurmond will certainly meet those criteria in the dead of winter. So, here we are again with the old prevention/response situation. How can we prevent hypothermia?

If it is really cold, stay home. If you want to be on the water, then bundle up. Wear layered clothing with a fleece-like material next to the skin and waterproof and wind-breaking outer clothing. Take warm drinks and food along. When on the boat stay out of the wind and rain if possible; it takes the heat out of our body. Don't stay out long, and at the first sign of hypothermia return to shore.

What are the symptoms?

- Shivering
- Bluish lips and fingernails
- Loss of feeling in extremities
- Cold, bluish skin
- Confusion
- Dizziness
- Rigidity in extremities
- Unconsciousness
- Coma

These symptoms are caused by the body trying to get the blood into its core to preserve organs and life itself. These will come on rapidly or slowly depending on the environmental temperature. The colder, the quicker.

If you are still in the boat, head for shore and a warmer environment. If you are in the water get out as soon as possible! Climb onto the boat hull or sit in the boat even if it is full of water. It may seem colder out of the water, but your body heat dissipates quicker in the water than out. If the boat has sunk, then there are some things you can do. First, keep all your clothing on, including your hat and shoes.

When people are cold on land, the natural tendency is to exercise. This brings the inner warmth to the skin and makes us feel warm. Not so when in the water. The inner body heat needs to be conserved. So, stay still. Since you are wearing a life jacket, pull your arms and legs close to your body. This is called the Heat Escape Lessening Posture (H.E.L.P.). If you are in a group, huddle together.

As the boat captain, once the person is out of the water take measures to conserve heat and slowly warm the victim up. Be careful about applying objects that are too hot. When experiencing hypothermia there is little feeling in the extremities and they could be easily burned. Warm liquids help but be sure the victim doesn't choke or that the liquid burns the mouth.

As with most incidents, prevention is the key with response kicking in when prevention fails. With hypothermia the response needs to be quick and early in the process. Once deep hypothermia sets in it is often difficult to reverse the symptoms. They accelerate and could result in coma and death. Immediate professional response is a must in deep hypothermia.

So, when the cold weather comes, and it will, stay by the fireplace, with a good book, and enjoy the cold rain through your window. It will be spring soon.