1.8 Cold Water Immersion & Hypothermia

Cold water can kill

No matter how good a swimmer you are, sudden unexpected immersion in cold water causes an initial cold shock that affects your muscular co-ordination and impairs your ability to swim. Heat loss from immersion can quickly cause hypothermia. Any of these factors can lead to drowning. Everyone has a responsibility to assess and manage the risk of immersion in cold water and to know what to do if it occurs.

Responsibilities

Personal

- Follow the Row Safe minimum standards and those set by clubs and competitions

Club

- Assess and control the risk of cold water immersion to your members
- Educate and train members in emergency procedures in the event of cold water immersion and hypothermia

Coach

- Follow the Row Safe minimum standards and those set by the clubs and competitions
- Manage and educate your coxswains and crews to ensure they are not at risk from hypothermia
- Manage the risk of cold water immersion

Club Water Safety Adviser/Regional Water Safety Adviser

- Monitor the compliance of clubs and competitions with Row Safe minimum standards

Competition Organisers

- Ensure your competition is managed with regard to cold water immersion and hypothermia risks to competitors and officials

Coxswains and Crews

- Monitor each other for signs of hypothermia and take appropriate action

Minimum standards to be adopted

Managing the risks before the outing if cold water immersion and hypothermia are assessed as potential issues. Remember that there is less rescue time in cold conditions.

Risk Management

- Check local weather forecasts and conditions (could conditions deteriorate during the outing?). Ask others with local knowledge to assist with your risk assessment
- Check all buoyancy compartments are sealed and equipment to be used is in good condition before going afloat
- Know and follow the local navigation rules
- Know and understand the local hazards in the area
- Don't go out in the dark alone or in cold or poor conditions
- Plan your rescue before you go afloat – will it work? Check it out
- Check safety boat cover is suitable for emergencies (if cover breaks down, abort the outing)
- Plan the outing so that the rescue time will be as short as possible
- Adopt the 'One minute - One degree' rule to help you plan

Clothing

- Should be bright and visible, with several layers to reduce heat loss
- Should be close-fitting, to avoid getting caught up in equipment
- Waterproof fabric is advisable for the outer layer
- Hats should be worn and not easily lost in a capsize situation
- Gloves or pogies will keep hands warm

Communication

- Set up a means of communication which is simple, easy-to-use and reliable. Check that it works
- Are there any communication dead spots and do you have a system to cover these areas?
- Use your boat outing board to record outing times and duration
- Set up a method of contacting emergency services

Equipment

- Throw lines must be available, in use and functional
- Thermal blankets need to be available – there must be enough for all crew members

1.8 Cold Water Immersion & Hypothermia

Competences

You should know what to do in the event of immersion:

- ***Stay with the boat*** and use it to keep you afloat
- Get on top of the boat and attract attention immediately
- If you have to stay in the water, retain warmth by keeping arms and knees tucked into the body
- Stay calm and breathe deeply
- Do not waste energy by trying to right the boat
- Do not swim away from the boat because your swimming ability in cold conditions is dramatically reduced
- Know the emergency procedures to be able to help effectively if you see a capsize

You should be aware of the effects of cold water immersion:

- Cold shock – what this is and how to deal with it
- Dry drowning – what this is and how it is avoided
- Swim failure – the situations in which this can happen
- The possibility of post rescue collapse and how to deal with it
- Hypothermia – recognise the signs, treatment and risk increase due to age, body type and size

Measuring and reviewing

- Record and review **all** capsizes and any cold/hypothermia incidents using the ARA online system
- Review all capsizes and any cold/hypothermia incidents and reassess safety procedures regularly

Further good practice

(In addition to minimum standards to be adopted)

- Adopt a 'buddy' system on the water. ***Look out for each other***
- Prepare an effective system for contacting emergency services comprising one point of contact and local reference points known to all
- Organise capsize drills and swim tests frequently for all members
- Practise the use of throw lines
- Investigate capsize incidents and spread learning from investigations to others in the sport
- A whistle or other simple means of summoning assistance should be available
- Personal flotation devices are advisable in high risk situations in low temperature conditions eg beginners - they could minimise the effects of swim failure
- Run local CPR and rescue training

Further information

Row Safe – related sections

- 1.9 Swimming & Capsize/Swamping Training

ARA website

- Basic Life Support poster

Other

- Level 2 Coaching Manual