

Don't Go Down With—Or Near—The Ship

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Obviously, the most severe danger that all mariners face is drowning. We live, work and play in a marine environment—a hostile marine environment, if one isn't careful. And, even you are careful, things happen. With fall approaching, and a lot of good fishing ahead, the waters will start to get cool.

An Ounce of Prevention

First, be wary of hypothermia. The symptoms to look for in others or yourself are the actions of someone who seems to have been drinking heavily—clumsiness, slurred speech, bad motor skills and crankiness. To avoid:

Keep dry, spare clothes aboard. They can even be added on top of wet clothing if need be.

How'd your clothes get wet? Could be from working the boat in foul weather or, worse, falling overboard. The only thing worse than falling overboard is not getting back aboard!

Always wear your life jacket. Inhaling cold water is a killer and that will be very hard NOT to do if you are under water.

Stay away from booze, period. Unlike the St. Bernard rescue dog stories, booze doesn't help you survive hypothermia.

Cold Shock/Gasp Reflex/Dry Drowning

How many stories have you heard over a lifetime where a seemingly minor event, like falling off a dock due to stumbling and landing in cold water, results in an almost incomprehensible death by drowning? It happens, and it shouldn't. How come the victim couldn't help themselves?

Years ago, while training with my son to be part of a USCG Auxiliary Cold Water team, we all received a workshop on developing an understanding of something called "Cold Shock" or the "Gasp Reflex." Basically, in water below 70 degrees Fahrenheit, which we are certainly boating in during the early months of spring and late months of fall, a number of nearly instant and deadly things can go wrong.

Even with your head above water, a splash of cold H₂O in your face from a boat's wake as it cruises by can cause you to involuntarily inhale water. This is the "gasp reflex."

For some people, as the cold water touches the back of their throat, it closes up. The spasm stops the water from getting into the body, which is the biological intent, but it also stops air from getting to the lungs. The person bobs back to the surface and they suffocate in the open water, unable to breathe due to a blocked air passageway. This is what is now called "dry drowning." There is no water in the lungs. Nor is there any oxygen. I've seen a BoatUS report that stated that 15 to 20 percent of all drownings are dry.

When the difference between your body temperature and the water temperature is greater than 30 degrees, the chance of a heart attack from the sudden immersion goes up dramatically.

Even something as simple as a racing heart from shock and fear can create hyperventilating on the part of the victim. Dizziness followed by unconsciousness results as the ratio of oxygen/carbon dioxide changes in the victim's blood system.

Despite all our advances in science and technology, our bodies only can survive a pretty narrow range of internal core temperatures. A drop of only 1.5 degrees from good ol' 98.6 is all it takes. A few more degrees and you'll stop shivering because your body can't anymore—there isn't enough energy in your body to shiver, much less climb into a boat or onto a dock. Another 4 or 5 degrees from there and the heart struggles to gather enough energy from your internal core to beat.

So if you fall in, get out, and fast.

If you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux2009@aol.com or go direct to Lisa Etter, who is in charge of new members matters, at FSO-PS@emcg.us.