

OPEN-WATER SAFETY

Cold Water, Clear Head

A practical safety guide for open-water swimmers

• A FREE GUIDE FROM SWIMFAST



Make every stroke conscious. Make every stroke count.



Before you start

Cold water is one of the most rewarding parts of open-water swimming, and one of the least forgiving if you misread it. This short guide covers what cold does to your body, how to spot trouble early in yourself and your swim partners, and how to respond well.



The signs and steps here follow recognised guidance from organisations like the RNLI and the Outdoor Swimming Society. It is general safety guidance, not medical advice. If you have a heart condition or any health concern, speak to your doctor before swimming in cold water.



What cold water does to your body

Two effects are worth understanding, because they catch people out in different ways.



Cold water shock, the first minute

Sudden cold makes you gasp and breathe fast, and you cannot fully control it. This is when most people get into difficulty, because a gasp underwater means inhaled water. Your heart rate and blood pressure rise at the same time, which is why cold water shock can be dangerous even for fit, healthy swimmers.

If cold water catches you off guard, do not try to swim straight away. The first effects pass in under a minute. Lean back, spread your arms and legs, and float until your breathing settles. Then swim to safety or call for help. This is the RNLI Float to Live message, and it works.



Cooling over time

The longer you stay in, the more your core temperature falls. This is slower and easier to miss than cold water shock, which is exactly why the warning signs on the next page matter.



The warning signs

Learn these so you can act on the early ones, in yourself and in others.

● EARLY SIGNS, CATCH IT HERE

≈ Shivering you cannot control



Cold, pale skin, and numb hands and feet

☹ Slurred or slower speech



Clumsy, fumbling hands, struggling with a zip or buckle

≈' Faster, shallower breathing

⚠ GETTING SERIOUS, ACT NOW

✗ Shivering stops, which is a warning and not a sign of warming up



Confusion, poor decisions, and pulling away from the group

⚡ Drowsiness, stumbling, and slowed movements



Weak, slow pulse and breathing



Watch your swim partners

The hardest person to assess is yourself, because cold dulls your judgment before you notice it. So watch each other. A simple way to remember what to look for:



Mumbles

Slurred speech, slow or confused answers



Grumbles

Irritable, argumentative, out of character



Fumbles

Dropping things, a change in stroke, hips and legs sinking



Stumbles

Unsteady on exit, trouble standing or walking

In the water, a cooling swimmer often turns more vertical and their fingers splay. Trust what you see over what they tell you. If you spot these signs, help them out.



What to do

- 1** **Get out of the water.** Sooner is always better than later.
- 2** **Remove wet kit and dry the skin and hair,** then layer up, starting with the upper body and then covering the head, core, hands, and feet.
- 3** **Warm the core gradually.** A warm, not hot, drink helps if the person is fully alert, and a warm car works well.
- 4** **Do not warm fast.** No hot showers, no rubbing the limbs, no direct heat on the skin, and no alcohol. Rapid rewarming pushes cold blood back to the core and can make things worse.
- 5** **Keep watching,** because symptoms can deepen after the swim.



EMERGENCY

If someone is not responding, barely breathing, or getting worse, call emergency services, keep them warm and still, and do not give food or drink.



Afterdrop, why you can feel worse later

You keep cooling after you get out. As blood returns from your cold arms and legs to your core, your deep temperature can keep falling for up to thirty minutes. In practice, you might feel only cool as you exit, then start shivering hard ten to fifteen minutes later, and at worst feel faint or unwell.



This is afterdrop, and it is normal. It is also the reason to get dry and layered promptly rather than standing around in the wind. **Warm up first, chat second.**



Building cold tolerance safely

You can train your body to handle cold better, but acclimatisation delays the onset of trouble, it does not remove it. The principles are simple:



Go often. Regular exposure is what builds tolerance, ideally one to three swims a week. Long gaps undo your progress.



Build gradually. Short and frequent beats long and occasional, so extend your time slowly.



Do not chase numbers. Get out when you stop being comfortable. You do not need to push to hypothermia to adapt.



Never alone. Swim with others, agree an exit plan, and tell someone on shore where you are.



Respect the day. Wind, current, and your own fatigue change the picture every session.

WINTER SQUAD

How Swimfast can support you

Swimfast Winter Squad runs from May to August in Johannesburg: progressive cold-water acclimatisation, two coaches in the water every session, technique work using See-Feel-Do, and guidance on gear, fuelling, and logistics. It is the structured, supported way to build cold tolerance for Robben Island or your next open-water swim.

The current cohort is full. To hear when the next intake opens, [register your interest with us.](#)



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