Cold Water Swimming – Yarrells School Pool, Upton

November 2025 – March 2026

The Risks of Cold Water Swimming

There are risks associated with cold water immersion. As a general rule, get expert medical advice before cold water swimming if you have a heart condition, high blood pressure, asthma, or are pregnant. Swim sober and avoid cold water if you have a hangover.

Cold Shock: This is the body's reaction to sudden cold. It begins with the gasp reflex and continues with uncontrolled hyperventilation. This is a good reason not to jump into cold water, as a sudden involuntary gasp for air can cause you to inhale water, if your head is submerged. The initial shock and rapid breathing can cause a feeling of panic and disorientation.

Instead, enter the water calmly and slowly. Breathe – Focus on slow, deep breathing as you enter the water to manage the shock. An unaccustomed person will experience a cold shock response even in water between 10 – 15 degrees Celcius.

Cold shock causes an increased heart rate and blood pressure, which can be dangerous for people with heart conditions.

Hypothermia: When your body temperature drops below 35 degrees Celsius you will begin to experience signs of hypothermia.

- **Uncontrollable shivering:** This is your body's natural attempt to warm itself up through involuntary muscle movements. As hypothermia worsens, this shivering may decrease or stop altogether, which is a very dangerous sign.
- **Slurred speech and mumbling:** Your speech may become slow and hard to understand.
- **Clumsiness and loss of coordination:** You may stumble and have trouble with simple movements.
- **Confusion, poor judgement or memory loss:** The cold can impair your ability to think clearly. You may experience confusion, memory loss, and a general lack of awareness.
- **Drowsiness and fatigue:** A strong sense of sleepiness or exhaustion is a dangerous sign.
- **Blue or pale skin:** Your skin, lips and extremities may turn blue or gray as your body restricts blood flow to protect your core.

- **Erratic or irrational behaviour:** Some people may become irritable or behave irrationally, including trying to remove their clothes in a confused state.
- **Nausea:** The body's systems, including digestion begin to slow down as a protective response to cold.
- **Faintness and Dizziness:** As the body temperature drops further, circulation decreases.
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Cramp: Cramp can strike anywhere, and some people are more prone than others. If you're cold, cramp is perhaps more likely. If you do cramp, float on your back, or swim to the side of the pool, and call for help. To help avoid cramp, drink plenty of water before and during your swim, maintain good electrolyte levels and warm up (exercises) properly before your swim.

Asthma: In some asthmatics, cold can trigger an attack. If you have asthma, please obtain medical advice before cold water swimming. If you have an inhaler, please bring it to the poolside.

After Drop: This is when your core temperature keeps dropping even after you've warmed up. After drop is common after swimming in cold water; you get out and feel fine, then as you start to warm up your peripheral blood vessels begin to open, and the warmed blood from your core is cooled rapidly. This will kick off some serious shivering, and you might find you can't keep your hot chocolate in the mug. This is another reason for warming gradually. If you feel unwell at this stage, sit down somewhere warm. Please note, your body temperature can continue to fall for up to 40 minutes after you get out of the water.

You have approximately 10 minutes after exiting the water before the after drop occurs, during these 10 minutes, you may feel absolutely fine and will not be shivering and therefore wonder what all the fuss is about. Don't hang around – use these 10 minutes to get dressed into your dry warm clothes as quickly as you can. It's a lot harder to dress yourself once those shivers kick in.

Top tips: How to manage after drop:

Get your wet stuff off immediately you get out of the water. Get dry quickly and layer up in warm clothes. Have your clothes ready in the order you put them on. Wear clothes that are easy to put on – the baggier the better! No buttons! Elasticated baggy clothes are best. Put a hot water bottle with your clothes while you are swimming. Wear a warm hat, warm socks and gloves after to help you warm up. Have a hot drink ready for when you are dressed. Put a hot water bottle around your back to warm your kidneys. Use hand warmers – rechargeable ones are best. Eat something to help you rewarm. Gentle movement helps circulation. Remember to warm up gradually – skip the hot shower (this can cause a dangerously rapid drop in blood pressure, causing dizziness and fainting, and/or a false sense of warming and your body stops it's natural warming, leading to a nasty after drop). Be patient – full recovery can take a few hours.

How long should I stay in the cold water for?

Don't stay in too long if you haven't been in for a while. It's always better to get out feeling like you could have done more. The hard part is the warming up after your swim and if you've depleted yourself in the water, what energy have you got left to warm yourself up? Build up the time you stay in the cold water slowly, helping you to acclimatise to cold water safely. Take note of the water and air temperature on each dip/swim, how long you stayed in for, how you felt during and after each swim, and any other contributing factors that could have affected your swim (e.g. lack of sleep/food etc). Top tip: Get out when you are still feeling good.

Swim your swim – just because your friend is staying in for longer, doesn't mean you will be able to. Instead, swim your own swim and get out when you need to.

Take each swim completely fresh - Everyone's bodies react differently on different days, depending on a of multiple factors – if you've eaten properly, if you're tired, under the weather, bad health/injuries, stressed, if you start off cold, if you haven't hydrated properly, and what your hormones are doing. One day can be very different to another day. Be kind to yourself and listen to your body. One day you can have a lovely cold swim for 10 minutes (for example) and be fine, but another day you could develop a nasty after drop post swim. For this reason, please don't use the 1 minute per degree rule – this is now not advised.

Stress: Getting into cold water can be a great way to manage stress, anxiety and depression, but it is also in itself a stressor. When you're already stressed your body's ability to cope with that cold stress when you dip/swim may not be as good as on a day when you are relaxed and chilled. Impacts of high stress levels include a stronger cold shock response, more difficulty in regulating breathing, lower cold water tolerance and a weakened ability to rewarm after a cold swim.

Stress isn't a reason not to swim or dip, but it is a reason to take care, be kind to yourself and really listen to your body.

What are some of the signs that you have stayed in too long and should have got out of the water earlier?

- **Weakness in arms and legs and a change in your swimming style** – limbs may feel heavy and sluggish, and your arms and legs may struggle to move or propel you. You may find it hard to coordinate your swimming strokes. You may start to swim more vertically, and your stroke may become less efficient.
- **Fatigue** - You will feel a significant drop in energy, and your stroke rate may slow down.
- **Loss of control in hands** – your hands may become stiff and claw-like, and you may be unable to grip or move your fingers properly.
- **Muscles cramps** – the cold can cause muscles to cramp, especially in your hands and feet.
- Any of the signs of **hypothermia** in the bullet points above.

Remember: Cold water dipping/swimming is all a learning experience. Be safe, look out for others, and of course, enjoy yourself!