Cold water is extremely dangerous. It quickly robs the body of its strength, diminishes coordination and impairs judgment. Immersion in water as warm as 50 to 60 degrees can initiate what has been called “Cold Water Shock.”

When a paddler capsizes and is suddenly immersed in cold water, the body’s first reflexive action is to gasp for air, followed by increased heart rate, blood pressure and disorientation. The immersion can even lead to cardiac arrest. Without proper equipment and apparel, the body can become incapacitated in just a few minutes. Without a lifejacket, this is a very dangerous and often fatal combination. When paddling where the water temperature is 60 degrees Fahrenheit or colder, a wetsuit is a must and a drysuit is highly recommended. This is also the case if the combined air and water temperatures are below 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

Cold water or cold weather can also lead to dangerous hypothermia. Hypothermia occurs when exposure to the elements prohibits the body from reheating and maintaining its core temperature. Typical symptoms of hypothermia include shivering, impaired judgment, clumsiness, loss of dexterity and slurred speech.
Moderate hypothermia
(shivering may decrease or stop)
Victim may seem irrational with deteriorating coordination. Treat the same as mild hypothermia, but no drinks.
Victim should be kept lying down with torso, thighs, head and neck covered with dry clothes, coats or blankets to stop further heat loss. Seek medical attention immediately.

Severe hypothermia
(shivering may have stopped)
Victim may resist help or be semiconscious or unconscious. Removed from water, victim must be kept prone, on back and immobile. Victim must be handled gently. Cover torso, thighs, head and neck with dry covers to stop further heat loss. Arms and legs must not be stimulated in any manner. Cold blood in extremities that suddenly returns to the core may induce cardiac arrest. Seek medical attention immediately.

Victim appears dead
(little or no breathing, no pulse, body rigid)
Assume victim can still be revived. Look for faint pulse or breathing for 2 minutes. If any trace is found, do not give CPR. It can cause cardiac arrest.
Medical help is imperative. If pulse and breathing are totally absent, trained medical personnel should start CPR.

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