



## HYPOTHERMIA HELP SHEET

Preparing for your swim at the Christmas 10K Event not only means undertaking enough training to be able to make your nominated distance, but it also means ensuring you are informed and aware of potential risks and how you can minimise the likelihood of them occurring. The most significant risk to swimmers in long distance open water events is **hypothermia**.

Please take the time to read the information below and ensure that your support paddler is also briefed on the warning signs.

Thank you to the **Rottnest Channel Swim Association** for providing this important material.

### Hypothermia

When the body is immersed in water cooler than the core body temperature, it is susceptible to hypothermia. Hypothermia is a reduction in core body temperature below 37°C and occurs when it loses more body heat than it can produce.

Water conducts heat away from the body 27% faster than in the air and that represents a significant loss of body heat for a swimmer who is in the water for extended lengths of time.

Hypothermia is most likely to affect those who:

- Have low body mass index/low body fat.
- Are in the water for a long period – a slow swim time or being in the water longer than six hours, although hypothermia can set in as quickly as 2-3 hours if the water temperature is low and the individual susceptible.
- Have little-to-no previous open water swimming experience.
- Have not properly prepared or fuelled for or during the swim.
- Is young or elderly.

Although some are more susceptible than others, it is important that every swimmer is monitored.

#### *Hypothermia warning signs:*

- Slurred speech
- Weakness
- Disorientation
- Combative behaviour
- Shivering
- Increased breath rate

A hypothermic swimmer will not be able to make rational judgments and will be operating on autopilot. They may not shiver or look cold and could finish the swim, walk up the beach, sit down or wander off. Most dangerously, they can just slowly slip beneath the surface and drown.

Statistics from previous Rottnest Channel Swim events show that approximately half of the solo field may become hypothermic. Hypothermia is the primary cause of event day hospitalisations.

## **Checklist (for C10K Support Paddlers)**

Hypothermia is life-threatening, and swimmers and their support crew must understand the signs. Ask your swimmer simple questions in a random order every 30-60 minutes.

These could include:

- What's your address and telephone number?
- When is your birthday?
- What's your mother's maiden name?
- What is the make of your car?

If the swimmer is battling with these simple questions, it could be a sign that hypothermia is setting in and they should withdraw from the swim and seek medical treatment. Paddlers should allow their swimmers to support themselves on their craft and gain the attention of the nearest water safety crew member who will evacuate the swimmer from the water.

Once the swimmer is out of the water, they should be handled gently, as rough handling can result in disturbances in heart rhythm. They should be dried, wrapped first in plastic garbage bags, a plastic sheet or foil blanket, and then covered in towels and blankets to protect them from the wind. This provides more efficient insulation and avoids getting wool fat on blankets. Shared body heat may also be appropriate.

Keep the person calm, still and awake and don't let them sleep. Don't rub or massage them. The First Aid crews on the beach will assist with the above treatment procedures.

Conscious swimmers should be encouraged to eat and drink small quantities of warmed fluids frequently. Do not give them alcohol as it increases the heat loss rate by dilating the skin's blood vessels.

## **Learn From Your C10K Experience**

Many swimmers will experience mild symptoms of hypothermia during and after the Christmas 10K and it's important to acknowledge that you may be able to address some aspects of your preparation and race so that you avoid a more significant episode during your Rottnest Crossing in February or March. Ask yourself the following questions and make any necessary changes now so that you give yourself the best chance of success later.

- Could you put on some weight and increase your BMI (body mass index) by seeing a nutritionist and getting advice on what you need to eat and how much?
- Could your nutrition plan during the race be adjusted so that you eat and drink more frequently and perhaps include warm drinks at some stops?
- Were you adequately prepared in terms of training?
- Did you have wool fat on and/or a race suit that covers a reasonable amount of your body?
- Have you done much training in the ocean to acclimatise to the conditions?

For more advice and information on the risks and ways to prevent hypothermia please visit the Rottnest Channel Association website – [www.rottnestchannelswim.com.au](http://www.rottnestchannelswim.com.au)