

Safety Tips: Cold Weather Precautions

Reprinted from www.USRowing.org Safety Section

When the weather turns cold, a lot of rowers head indoors, but there is still a minority that insists on heading out on the water. USRowing always wants rowers to be cautious, but we know that there will be those who want to row until the ice stops them. Most rowing on the water above the mid-Atlantic in the east and Texas in the midwest stops when the fall racing season is over, but there are some clubs and rowers that have developed procedures to allow cold water rowing.

The policies of each club are going to be dictated by their situations. Do you row on an open body of water with little hope of an imminent rescue, or do you row on a small river that is lined with houses? Are you a single sculler heading out by yourself, or is your team rowing through the winter? Your club has to develop a plan that makes sense, and it has to make sure that all the members are aware of the plan and follow the procedures.

Cold water rowing is dangerous; there is no way around it. Below are survival times for persons immersed in cold water. These times are for people in the water. But, you also have to keep in mind how long you will be in wet clothing on top of your boat or on the shore once you get out of the water. Uncontrollable shivering, disorientation and impaired judgment start to occur before exhaustion or unconsciousness.

<i>Water Temp.</i>	<i>Exhaustion or Unconsciousness</i>
Under 32 degrees	Under 15 minutes
32.4-40	15-30 minutes
40-50	30-60 minutes
50-60 °	1-2 hours

Below are some recommendations for those who want to be on the water during cold weather.

- Row with a safety launch. Not only might you get some coaching, this person can throw you a life jacket, pull you out of the water, help you back in your boat, and if need be, get you back to the boathouse fast and then take care of your boat.
- We know the law says if you row on a body of water that is deemed “navigable” by the United States Coast Guard you do not have to have a life jacket in your boat with you, but what about common sense? If you are a single sculler and you row during the winter months, take an inflatable life jacket and stuff it behind the footboard. If you go out with a safety launch, make sure the launch has enough life jackets for everyone on the water.
- If you head out without a safety launch, then row with a buddy – someone who can help you get back into your boat, can give you a dry shirt and help you if you become disoriented due to the onset of hypothermia.
- Carry a cell phone in a waterproof container. Call for help before you become so cold that you won’t be able to work the phone. If you are going to call for help, you have to know where you are, which means knowing some specific locations on shore to help the rescuers to find you. Telling 911 that you are “at the 1,500-meter mark” is not helpful, but knowing a street name or number, or major landmark, is.
- If your cell phone is not operable on the water, carry a sound-making device. Whistles, horns, something loud enough so that somebody on shore will hear and then see you in the water.
- The logbook at the boathouse is good, but only if there is someone checking it. If you are the last/only person on the water, then it may be hours before someone checks the logbook. Don’t rely on it unless you know that someone will come looking for you if you don’t sign back in.

- If you row on a river or a body of water that has a large fluctuation of speed, know what the speed is. Some clubs have a flow meter link on their sites, and you can check to see how fast and how high the water flow is. Usually with high levels of water comes a high level of debris.

Below are a few policies that are currently used by clubs to determine or allow boats on the water and what precautions must be in place.

- At many clubs when cold weather rules go into effect, the boathouse shuts down. This usually happens when the fall season is over and there are not safety launches out anymore.
- Water and air temperature combined at 90 degrees. For example: if the water is 50 degrees and the air is 40 degrees, then the cold weather rules go into effect.
- When the water temperature is 50 degrees puts the cold water rules in effect. If the water gets below 50 degrees, then the survival time is probably not long enough for a rescue and precautions must be taken.
- A common rule is the “4-oar” rule. This rule keeps singles and pairs off the water. The theory being that with four or more oars on the water, the likelihood of flipping is greatly reduced.
- A more aggressive rule used by a large boathouse is when the water temperature is 50 degrees the “4-oars” rule goes into effect and rowers must have one of the following: a safety launch following with all the safety supplies, or must wear an inflatable life jacket, or must wear a neoprene suit. For this program, not only do the rowers have to have four oars, they also need other gear to help them survive a cold plunge.

Cold weather rowing brings its own set of risks, and you and your club need to take precautions to protect yourself and the boathouse. Flipping a boat, hitting a log, or getting into some other accident is unpleasant enough. Don't make it more dangerous by not following a few simple rules that make sense for your body of water and your club.