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Winter Camping & Hypothermia

Hypothermia

By Michael R. Schmehl

Elsewhere in this database is an article concerning dressing properly for winter activities outdoors. This article shall deal with a deadly hazard which stems from foregoing such pre-cautions.

Hypothermia, sometimes mistakenly referred to simply as "expo- sure", is a lowering of the body's core temperature caused by over-ex- posure to cool or cold air or water.

One need not be subjected to near zero air temperatures or icy waters to be overcome, in fact, most cases of hypothermia occur during the spring, summer and fall. While the basic effects of air or water induced hypothermia are similar, the speed of occurrence and progression differs. Examine the case of a muskie fisherman or duck hunter whose boat capsizes in 50 degree water. From the moment of immersion, body heat will begin being lost via the skin. Seconds later, once saturated, more precious heat is drawn from such vulnerable body areas as the groin and sides of the chest. Shivering, a natural form of body heating, occurs and becomes intense; blood circulation slows to the arms and legs, saving heat for the vital body core area. In under two hours, when the body core temperature drops to about 87 degrees, the average person will lose consciousness. If the victim is not wearing a proper flotation device, drowning is likely. Should he be so equipped, yet not soon rescued, within the next hour the core temperature will reach the mid 70's, at which time the heart fibrillates and death follows.

With air/wind induced hypothermia, depending on air temperature and wind speed (chill factor), the symptoms may not be so apparent, both to the victim or any companions. Indeed, in the primary stages, the victim may even refuse to acknowledge there is a problem. Progression begins with a natural sense of cold accompanied by shivering. A feeling of numbness then occurs while shivering increases to where it's soon uncontrollable. Speech is garbled or incoherent, and the thought process slows. Body movements are erratic, and uncovered skin swells and appears blue. If the victim or members of his group do not spot the problem soon, unconsciousness will take place, followed by the possibly fatal lowering of the body core temperature.

Before noting treatment, beware of some special problems akin to water related hypothermia. While a sufferer onland can exercise, build a fire or make use of a sleeping bag to recover, such options are not available to the victim in the water. Indeed, exercise in water can cause heat to be lost over 30% faster than if one were to remain motionless.

So the question arises as to whether one should try to swim for the shore or remain still in the hope that rescue will take place before becoming overwhelmed. Naturally such a life or death choice rests with the victim, so recalling the aforementioned case of water immersion and its progression, also note the fact that, in 50 degree water, the average person could not swim even one full mile, before being rendered helpless.

The treatment for both types of hypothermia are alike. Basically it requires that the body core temperature be raised to a normal level, aided by outside sources of heat. Some recommended suggestions include: stripping the victim, who is then placed into a sleeping bag along with one or two likewise attired companions (in such a situation there's no room for modesty); get dry clothes on the victim then huddle together; the use of fire, alone, or with either of the foregoing; administer hot, non-alcoholic drinks; or the warm breath of rescuers (or steam) can be used via the victim's inhalation. Once the victim is properly rewarmed, he can be moved. At this time he should be checked by the nearest doctor; never even think of merely continuing your activities.

By using the layer effect of several pieces of clothing instead of one heavy garment, you can better maintain proper body temperature and reduce the chance of sweating. Clothing which has become wet from sweating, rain or snow is the primary cause of air related hypothermia. Too many outdoors

people die needlessly each year because of hypothermia; keep alert, be careful and dress properly so it doesn't happen to you; believe me, it can happen when you least expect it!!! I know, I almost became a victim,....but that's another story.....

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Many thanks to Irene Brown who typed this article, thereby saving my two fingers untold suffering.

Mike Schmehl