

Survival Skills: 5 Hypothermia Myths, and The Real Treatments

by Tim MacWelch

Hypothermia is a medical condition that occurs when a person's body core temperature drops below 95 degrees Fahrenheit. This can be caused by exposure to water, wind, very cold air, or a combination of these elements. Hypothermia is one of humanity's oldest adversaries, which has given us plenty of time to create an abundance of myths and misinformation on the treatment of this dangerous condition.

Myth 1 – Drink liquor to warm up

While strong drink may have a place in some survival scenarios, it is the last beverage you should sip if you are in the grip of cold-weather exposure. If you drink anything, take small sips of a warm drink like hot tea or hot cocoa. Alcohol can move blood to the skin and dull the pain of the cold, making you feel warmer. But as this is happening, your core will chill faster, which only harms you further.

Myth 2 – Walk it off

Exercise has been documented as saving lives in near-hypothermia cases, but the loss of critical body heat can result in a loss of dexterity, poor mental state, a loss of consciousness, and all kinds of clumsiness. Trying to jog or do any vigorous exercise will definitely tire you out. You could even fall, adding broken bones to your hypothermia situation. Skip the jumping jacks and get into dry clothing, a warm shelter, or near a roaring fire. Don't try to walk off this injury.

Myth 3 – It's okay to sleep while hypothermic

A few minutes in cold water, or a few hours in the cold wind, can send someone's body deep into hypothermia. After the shivering, confusion, slurred speech, numbness, and clumsiness have manifested, an exposure victim will also get very tired, sometimes claiming that they just need a little nap. This extreme tiredness is a very serious warning sign. Hypothermia victims often go to sleep just before they die. Keep them awake at all costs, as you warm them up.

Myth 4 – A hot bath, hot tub, or sauna will cure hypothermia

Rewarming someone is the main method of cold exposure treatment, both in the field and in the hospital. But dropping somebody in the Jacuzzi will be excruciatingly painful to a hypothermia victim's skin, and it can even cause a heart attack. Active external rewarming can be done for the patient by applying warm items externally (such as hot water bottles in both armpits). Skin-on-skin rewarming is also safe and gentle (although potentially awkward). Never use hot baths, steam rooms, or any other high-heat scenario to treat a hypothermic person.

Myth 5 – Never feed a hypothermic person

Normal shock treatment and hypothermia treatment are different, yet often confused for one another. You don't want to feed someone who may be going into shock because they can vomit and choke while unconscious. However, in mild to moderate hypothermia cases, high-calorie foods can be given in small, repeating doses to create metabolic heat in the victim. This is known as passive external rewarming, and it involves the use of a person's own heat-generating ability. Get them out of their wet clothes, get them into some properly insulated dry clothing, and provide a little high-calorie food and sips of a hot beverage.

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