

Cold Water Shock

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The long term effect after falling into cold water is called [hypothermia](#). The short term effect is called cold water shock.

If you fall in to cold water, the first response is an involuntary gasp reflex, causing you to inhale sharply. This can lead to water entering the lungs, increasing the risk of drowning. Following the gasp reflex, breathing becomes rapid, this involuntary breathing is called hyperventilating. Again, this breathing can lead to water entering your lungs. It can also cause panic and a loss of control and disorientation, making it difficult for you to swim. If your head is underwater when you gasp, you will immediately drown. Without the support of a PFD, you will sink.

Cold water shock triggers your body's stress response, leading to an increase in heart rate and blood pressure. This can strain your heart and cause cardiac arrest. As your body tries to keep warm the muscles in your arms and legs will begin to cool which reduces strength, coordination and your ability to swim.

If you can, put your hand over your mouth when you fall in. Try to lie on your back and relax. The effects of cold water shock pass quite quickly, usually in a couple of minutes.