Cold Water Shock

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Cold water shock will rob even the strongest swimmer of the ability to hold his head above water or reach for an extended hand. It's a phenomenon many workers underestimate and one responsible for countless drowning deaths each year.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

A sudden fall into icy water will send the body into cold water shock and leave a person unable to control his reactions. The initial shock (similar to how a person might react if ice is poured down his back) often takes a person's breath away and causes him to swallow water. Within minutes, his hands and body are so numb he is unable to reach for help or pull himself out of the water. As panic sets in, his heart races, his blood pressure increases and he is unable to swim. Death comes in as little as three to five minutes in water as warm as 77ºF (25ºC) but usually closer to 59ºF (15ºC).

EXAMPLE
A forklift driver swerves to miss another worker and drives off the pier and into the ocean. Witnesses see the man surface after the crash and wave his arms frantically as he bobs up and down. Suddenly, as a rescue boat approaches, the man tilts face first into the water. Rescuers pull him from the water but are unable to revive him.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Wear a lifejacket or personal flotation device (PFD) when working on or around the water, regardless of how well you swim. These devices will keep your head above water when your body is no longer able to.

- Wear a wetsuit or immersion suit that protects your extremities and will reduce the effect of cold water on your heart rate, blood pressure and breathing.
- Develop and practice recovery drills.
- Know what to do in an emergency and practice rescuing workers from the water on the first attempt.
- Use guardrails and safety harnesses intended to keep you out of the water.

- Stay out of the water. If a colleague falls in, do not go in after him.
- Never abandon a capsized boat and attempt to swim to shore

FINAL WORD

Understand the effect cold water has on the body and the importance of conserving your energy and keeping your head above water until rescuers come. This is important advice for all workers, especially those working on or near water (including longshoremen, highway crews and bridge workers).