

Coping With Cold-Water Swimming

Updated: Apr 1st 2011 12:29 PM UTC by [Training](#)

Coach Kevin Koskella provides tips on how to minimize the effects of the cold water in your next open-water swim. Use these tips to gain an edge on your competition!

Written by: Kevin Koskella

I'll be the first to say, I hate the cold! Cold air, and especially cold water. Even after 14 years of competitive swimming, I never once got used to or enjoyed jumping into a cold pool.

These days, I prefer open water swimming to pool swimming, but refuse to get in our local Pacific Ocean until it gets up around 66 degrees or so. Anything below that and I'm known to turn various shades of purple!

Cold water cannot only be unpleasant and draining, but can also be dangerous. A couple of months ago here in Southern California, a swimmer had to be rescued because of the frigid conditions. The point is that it's always best to do your open water swim training with a partner just in case!

There are many triathlons where cold water is part of the challenge- especially the early season ones, like April and May (and even mid-summer in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest). What can you do about cold water, other than be uncomfortable, get an ice cream headache, and use up lots of your body's energy just trying to stay warm? Here is a list of tips to minimize the negative affects of cold-water swimming.

1. Wear two caps. You lose most of your heat through your head, and doubling up your "capage" helps you to keep your heat in.
2. Wear a neoprene cap. Neoprene handles the cold-water better than standard latex and can help keep your head warm.
3. You also lose lots of heat through your feet. Neoprene socks are also a good idea, but you may want to use these mostly on training swims, as they can be a hassle when it comes to transitioning to your bike!
4. Wear a wetsuit, but more specifically, a full suit. The sleeveless suits allow heat to escape through your armpits. I learned this the hard way when doing the Alcatraz swim in 52-degree water with one of these sleeveless, "farmer John" suits. By the time I finished, I was in the early stages of frostbite. Keep in mind that wetsuits are allowed in triathlons for water temperatures 75 degrees Fahrenheit or below, according to USA Triathlon rules.
5. Put in earplugs. When the water drops below 60 degrees, I believe earplugs become necessary- and they aid in keeping your core temperature up.
6. Practice swimming in cold water in the weeks before your race. It can be a shock to your system that can lead to hyperventilating or a panicked feeling. You will want to swim slowly until you get your breath. The first time you experience this it can throw you off, but with practice, you will get used to it and be able to relax into your swim.
7. Do a significant warm up (10-15 minutes minimum) the morning of your race. This will minimize the shock effect that cold water can have, and will allow you to get into a stroke rhythm much faster.
8. When the cold water hits your face, the shock causes your lungs to contract causing breathing problems. Blow bubbles before taking off on your swim. Go waist deep into the water and submerge your face to blow bubbles. This helps alleviate the shock of the cold water.

If used correctly, these tips can help you to not only tolerate cold-water swimming, but also gain an advantage on your unprepared competition!