

Dealing with Weather, Water and the Elements in Open Water Swims



The 3 most common conditions that can negatively affect the performance of open water swimmers are (1) cold water and cold conditions, (2) warm water and warm conditions, and (3) jellyfish.

Cold water and cold, windy conditions can affect swimmers in different ways. Wearing ear plugs and two swim caps can help reduce the effect of cold water. Putting on a thin layer of lanolin on the skin can help reduce the immediate and unpleasant feeling of cold water on the skin. The lanolin should be thinly applied to the chest, neck, back, upper legs and torso, and it can be pressed firmly into the skin.

Also, keeping one's mouth closed, except when breathing, and wearing silicon earplugs, are also good measures to combat cold water.

However, the best preparation for cold water is simply acclimating to cold water. This can best be done by training in cold water, but if training in cold water is not possible, taking cold showers over a prolonged period can help.

Open water swimmers occasionally talk about hypothermia. Hypothermia is when the body's core body temperature drops and is caused by prolonged exposure to cold water during open water races, especially when combined with chilly winds. It is a possibility especially for swimmers with a low body fat percentage. Hypothermia is medically defined when the core body temperature drops below 95°F. Mild hypothermia may be identified by increased shivering. Severe hypothermia must be treated immediately by medical professionals.

Warm water and warm, humid conditions also can severely impact swimmer's performance. The opposite of hypothermia is hyperthermia where the body's core temperature increases. There are several degrees of hyperthermia, ranging from Heat Edema where the hands and feet swell to Heat Stroke which is a serious medical emergency. The effects of warm water temperatures can be increased when the humidity is also high under cloudless skies in summer. This often leads to dehydration, especially if the swimmer does not properly feed and hydrate before and during the race.

Jellyfish, Portuguese Man o' War, sea nettles and sea lice can all cause problems for swimmers, ranging from uncomfortable to dangerous. Because the stings can cause mild to excruciating pain, medical attention is usually necessary, especially in extreme cases or when there is an allergic reaction.

The best response is to immediately obtain qualified medical attention.

If no doctors or lifeguards are around, it is thought that the best treatment for stings is to immediately apply vinegar. If vinegar or other treatment is not immediately available by a doctor, lifeguard or race official, then the application of hot water to the affected area can ease the pain.

The stinging cells must be removed by picking off the tentacles on the body. But, the first aid providers should use gloves to prevent injury to themselves. Some people remove the venom in the skin by applying a paste of baking soda and water and a cloth covering the sting. The paste can be reapplied every 15-20 minutes.