



COLD WATER MINI GUIDE

Practical Tips for Safe & Confident
Swimming Through the Colder Months

“You’ll Never Regret a
Winter Swim!”
Trudy,
Whitstable, UK

By Alice Goodridge

...With Additional Top Tips From The
Cold Water Swimming Community!

PREPARATION: PLAN, PACK & FUEL

**SAFETY
FIRST**

“Never get your heart set on a swim. Turn up, assess the conditions — not just the water and surroundings but yourself and how you are feeling — then decide whether it is safe to swim!” — ABS, Edinburgh, Scotland

“Check the weather forecast, especially wind speed, and plan your swim accordingly.” — Maiké, Highlands, Scotland

“Never swim alone. If you can't find someone to swim with, take someone to spot for you. Check your entry and exit points - it could be harder to get out of the water when you are cold.” — Rob, South Wales

“Have something warm in your belly before you get in. My group often goes at sunrise so it can be hard to make sure you are fuelled properly.” — Sophie, New Haven, Connecticut, USA

Essential Rules for Cold-Water Swimming

- Before swimming in cold water check with your doctor, especially if you have any medical conditions or health concerns.
- **Never swim alone - always have a buddy or a spotter watching from shore. Even experienced swimmers can get into difficulties in cold water.**
- Assess the conditions & yourself - wind, waves, how you are feeling.
- **Have an emergency plan. Make sure your phone is charged and accessible, you have signal, and you know how to get help if needed.**
- Don't mix cold water with alcohol or drugs. Alcohol increases heat loss, impairs judgement, and can mask early signs that it's time to get out.
- **If in doubt, don't get in. There's always another day.**

Good preparation sets you up for a safer, more enjoyable swim.

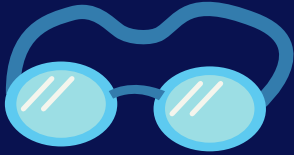
Before You Leave Home

- Check the weather: air temperature, wind direction and speed, and the “feels-like” temperature.
- Fuel up: eat 30–90 minutes before your swim to support warmth and energy.
- Stay hydrated - cold water swimming still dehydrates you.
- Pack your swim kit and plenty of warm layers for afterwards.
- Pack a hot drink and a small snack for post-swim recovery.
- Make sure your phone is charged.

When You Arrive

- Assess the conditions: wind, waves, current etc.
- Check the water itself - depth, visibility, and what's floating or hidden below the surface. If the water doesn't look right (heavy weed, debris, pollution, poor visibility), don't get in.
- Choose a sheltered spot if possible - wind chill pulls heat from your body fast.
- Check your entry + exit routes and plan the quickest, safest way out.

⚠ This guide shares general safety guidance and lived experience. Always use your own judgement, swim within your abilities and seek professional medical guidance if you have health concerns. Physiological responses to cold and rewarming vary between individuals, and some explanations are simplified for clarity.



WHAT TO WEAR & BRING



Finding What Works for You

There's no single "right" way to dress for cold-water swimming.

Some swimmers like to wear full neoprene — thermal wetsuit, hood, gloves, socks - while others prefer the simplicity of a swimsuit or bikini. Both are fine. The key is comfort, safety, and being able to warm up quickly afterwards.

In the Water

(Mix and match what suits your body and the conditions.)

- Swimsuit / wetsuit / neoprene layers: Wetsuits help you stay in longer; skins swimming means quicker changes.
- Swim hats: Double up (silicone + neoprene) or wear a woolly hat for head-up swims.
- Neoprene gloves & socks: Keep extremities warm and prevent non-freezing cold injuries.
- Earplugs: Help prevent dizziness and "surfer's ear."
- Large goggles: Cover more of your face to reduce "brain freeze."
- Tow float: Adds visibility.

💡 Warmth isn't a competition — find what feels best for you.

"Having swum through my first winter, I found across my shoulders and the back of my neck the most painful in very cold water. Now I wear a 'mini' wetsuit — long arms, short legs, around 3mm. It keeps me warm and I don't need to be struggling out of a big, heavy wetsuit in the cold!" — Gwen, Scottish Highlands



"Wrap your clothes round a hot water bottle and put in an insulated bag (the cheap ones from the supermarket will do), super toasty clothes for after and the hot water bottle stays warm!" — Corrie, Pendel, England

After Your Swim

Getting dry and dressed fast is just as important as what you wear in the water.

Focus on your core and head first - warmth and wind protection are key.

- Woolly hat: First thing on, last thing off.
- Changing robe / towel robe: Keeps you warm and blocks wind.
- Easy-on clothing: Loose joggers, fleeces, oversized jackets - skip fiddly zips or buttons.
- Plenty of layers: Multiple layers rather than one heavy jumper. Never underestimate the number of layers you can put on after a cold water swim!
- Warm socks and slip-on shoes or boots. Stand on a mat or towel to stop the cold ground drawing heat from your feet.
- Hot water bottle: Comfort and warmth.
- Warm drink & snack: Essential for re-fuelling and helping your body heat up.

BEFORE YOU GET IN

Small habits that will make your swim safer and more enjoyable:

Protect Your Warmth

- Avoid standing around getting cold — minimise heat loss before you enter the water.

Set Up Your Exit

- Lay out/pile up your clothes in reverse order (woolly hat → towel → base layers).
- Keep everything close to your exit point so you can change quickly.



“Before I get in the water I always arrange my clothes in the order I’m going to put them back on afterwards — it saves time when you’re cold and trying to get changed!” — Mia, London

GETTING IN: SLOW & STEADY

The first moments are the hardest — take your time. Cold water can take your breath away. Get into the water slowly - **no jumping or diving.**

As you enter, your body reacts automatically. Instinct tells us to take a big breath in and hold it, or to gasp and take lots of shallow breaths - making it hard to ‘catch our breath’. This usually lasts 1–3 minutes.

Focus on breathing out. Long, steady exhalations help your breathing settle and prevent hyperventilation.

Keep your feet on the bottom until your breathing feels calm and controlled.

Want to understand what’s happening inside your body at this stage? Here’s a simple guide to **Cold Water Shock.**



**SAFETY
FIRST**

Communication is Key

Swimming with others is essential - but what keeps you safe isn’t just having a group, buddy or a spotter... it’s communicating clearly with them. Do you have a plan if something goes wrong?

- Agree your intentions & limits before you get in.
- Agree a simple “I’m OK” signal.
- If someone is spotting from land, agree what they should do if you need help.

inhale
exhale



“It sounds basic, but don’t forget to breathe. You get in, it’s cold, there’s an instinct to hold your breath. Don’t. Don’t tense up. Relax and breathe.”
— Amy, Minnesota, USA

Don’t Rush - Set Off Gently

Don’t start swimming until you feel steady and back in control of your breath.

Once you begin to swim, your breathing may quicken again - especially if you put your face in.

Try dipping your face in gradually, or keep your face out of the water and swim head-up breaststroke — a cold-water-friendly, calm, and controlled option!

COLD WATER SHOCK

Cold water shock is your body's sudden, involuntary reaction when cold water ($\approx 15^{\circ}\text{C}$ or lower) hits warm skin.

It's not hypothermia - it happens immediately, right at the start of immersion. **The danger is highest in the first 1–3 minutes.**

Why It's Dangerous

When cold water hits your skin, nerve receptors send an emergency signal to your brain. This can cause:

- An involuntary gasp (if your face is under water, you could inhale water)
- Rapid, shallow breathing — up to 5–10× faster than normal
- A feeling of panic or loss of control over breathing
- Heart strain as blood vessels tighten and blood pressure rises

Even strong swimmers can struggle to stay afloat until their breathing settles.

How to Prevent & Manage It

- Never jump or dive in - enter slowly
- Splash water on arms, shoulders, neck, and face before submerging
- Focus on breathing out - long, steady exhalations help regain control
- Keep your feet down and wait 1–3 minutes for breathing to settle before swimming
- **If entry is sudden or unplanned: stand if you can, or float → control breathing → then move to safety**

Important Facts

- Cold water shock can happen any time of year
- Experience and fitness do not protect you
- Many drownings occur close to shore, before people can get control of their breathing



Remember:

- **The first 1–3 minutes are the danger zone.**
- **Take your time getting in.**
- **Let your breathing settle before you swim.**



Focus on making sure your exhale is longer than your inhale.

This helps stop gasping, slows your breathing, and restores control.



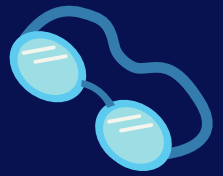
Factors that affect how you'll cope with the cold on any given day.

Physical: air temperature, water temperature, wind speed/direction, wave/chop conditions.

Personal: hydration, energy levels (how much sleep / stress / food you've had), recent medication or illness, menstruation or hormonal changes, your recent acclimatisation history.

On days when you're tired, hungry, stressed or the wind's biting, you'll cool faster.

IN THE WATER



STAY SAFE, STAY PRESENT

Once you're in the water, notice how your body feels, and pay attention to your breathing, your movements, and your surroundings.

- Don't go far – keep close to your kit and exit point at all times. Swim shorter laps rather than a longer stretch.
- Swim parallel to the shore, ideally where you can still put your feet down if you need to.
- Focus on long, calm exhalations to stay relaxed and in control.
- Check in with your buddy often - swimming together means actively looking out for each other, not just being in the water at the same time.

About Acclimatisation

With repeated exposure your body may shiver less and breathe more easily at entry - but this doesn't mean you should stay in longer than is safe. Conditions and personal factors still matter every time you swim.

SWIM YOUR OWN SWIM

Never use someone else's report of a temperature/ time/distance as a target. Every swimmer is different, and we all have different capabilities and tolerances.

Cold-water swimming isn't a competition - it's about listening to your body and responding to the conditions.

- Don't compare yourself to others - everyone reacts differently to the cold.
- Some days you'll feel great and stay in longer; some days a short dip is enough - both are ok.
- Build up gradually and don't attempt to stay in for a particular time/distance (unless you have professional/experienced safety cover). Look at the conditions on the day and see how you feel.
- If anything feels "off," stop and get out - there's always another day.

"Take your time, acclimatise, don't swim alone, listen to your body and **don't be a hero**. Just because you did 10 minutes last week doesn't mean you will be able to do that next time. No matter how experienced you are, every cold water swim is a learning experience." — Stuart, England/Scotland

"Don't compare yourself to others and stay in the cold water longer than you should... there's no race and no dip worth risking our own health because we want to be like someone else. Listen to your body, not someone else's." — Brenda, Nova Scotia, Canada



KNOWING WHEN TO GET OUT

Get out while you still feel good

Cooling begins as soon as you enter cold water.

A key skill is recognising the moment before cooling accelerates and control begins to slip.

The most experienced swimmers don't wait for warning signs - they get out early, while they still feel strong and capable. This matters because your core temperature will continue to drop after you leave the water (see p11, Afterdrop)

Your ideal get-out point

Get out when:

- Your breathing is calm and controlled
- Your strokes feel smooth and easy
- You feel comfortable, present, and in control
- You think: "I could happily stay a bit longer"

💡 **That moment - when you still want more - is the safest and best time to get out.**

If you stay beyond this window, cooling can accelerate quickly

These signs mean heat loss is increasing and your body is starting to struggle - this is your cue to end the swim immediately:

- Hands or forearms suddenly feel much colder or painful
- Hands begin to curl or lose dexterity ("claw hands"), making it harder to grip, signal, or undo clothing later
- Shivering starts while you're still in the water
- Strokes and limbs begin to feel heavier or clumsier - often described as "swimming through mud" or "treacle"
- Deep cold around the shoulders, upper back, or lower back/kidney area
- Breathing becomes harder to control again, especially after it had settled
- Feeling foggy, floaty, or less confident in your movements
- A sudden warm, relaxed, or euphoric feeling - a misleading 'warm glow' that can be caused by cold stress



"My arms tell me when it's time to get out."
— Verona, Angus, Scotland

If you notice any of these, stop swimming and head straight for your exit point.

Why getting out early matters

Cold water gradually dulls sensation and judgement. If you wait until you feel very cold, you've likely stayed in too long - and the afterdrop will deepen the cooling once you're out. Getting out while you still feel good gives your body a **safety buffer** for what comes next.

If cooling continues beyond this point, it can progress into hypothermia. The next page explains how to recognise it early and what to do.



"It's all about you!

It doesn't matter how long someone else can stay in the water or what they think you should do, listen to your body and your head. Some days it will feel fab and others it's horrid. Never ignore how you feel. Always be safe and always save some energy for getting dressed!!!!"

— Donna, North Lincolnshire, UK

HYPOTHERMIA:

RECOGNISE IT EARLY & ACT FAST

Hypothermia occurs when your core body temperature drops below 35°C because heat is being lost faster than the body can produce it. In cold water, this can develop faster than expected. As the body cools, thinking, coordination, and judgement are affected early - often before you realise what's happening.

There are common early warning signs that the body and brain are being affected by cold, even before someone realises they're in trouble.

Early warning signs

(often referred to as '*theumbles*')

- **Stumbles** - loss of balance or coordination
- **Fumbles** - struggling with goggles, tow-floats, zips or gloves
- **Mumbles** - slurred, slowed, or unclear speech
- **Grumbles** - irritability, confusion, withdrawal

Other early warning signs:

- Uncontrollable shivering, blue tinged lips, tiredness or unusual quietness.

People experiencing these signs often say they're "fine" - this is part of the risk.

Worsening hypothermia - Urgent

As cooling continues, symptoms become more serious and dangerous:



- Shivering becomes intense - or stops altogether
- Marked confusion or apathy
- Slowed, shallow breathing
- Extreme fatigue or drowsiness
- Inability to dress or care for themselves
- Loss of consciousness



This is a medical emergency.

RESPONDING TO HYPOTHERMIA: WHAT TO DO

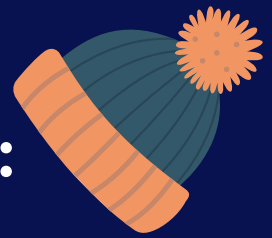
Act quickly but calmly. When someone is too cold, gentle, steady care makes all the difference.

- Get out of the wind and out of wet clothes immediately.
- If helping someone else, make sure you are warm and dressed first - you can't help effectively if you become hypothermic too.
- Focus on warming the core and head first (not arms or legs).
- Wrap in dry layers or blankets - dry and insulate first.
***Do not** wrap someone in an emergency (foil) blanket while they're wet or undressed. Foil blankets should only be used over the top of warm layers, not instead of them.*
- Offer a hot, sweet drink if alert.
- Warm gradually and steadily - avoid sudden intense heat if person is cold and shaky.
- Stay put until fully warm and alert.
- Don't drive or leave alone until your temperature has recovered.
- If shivering stops, confusion worsens, or someone becomes drowsy → this is a medical emergency. Call for help immediately.

💡 **Even strong, experienced swimmers can become hypothermic quickly in windy or cold conditions. Always look out for one another before, during, and after your swim.**



AFTER YOUR SWIM: WARM UP WISELY



Your recovery starts the moment you leave the water.

As soon as you get out, GET CHANGED – no stopping to chat, even if you feel fine.

Cold water continues pulling warmth from your body even after you've stepped out, so what you do in the first 2-5 minutes matters most. The priority at this stage is to stop further heat loss and begin rewarming gradually.

Prevent Further Heat Loss

- Get out of the wind immediately - cover up (towel or robe) and shelter behind a wall, rock, car, boathouse.
- Put on a woolly hat first - a huge amount of heat is lost through the head.
- Strip off wet layers quickly and dry off as best you can.
- Keep your swim cap on until you're dressed if it helps retain warmth.

Layer Up (Warm the Core First)

- Use simple, easy-to-put-on layers: fleece, insulated jacket, leggings, wool socks.
- Prioritise your core, neck, and head before arms and legs.
- More thin layers are better than one bulky one.

Get Moving & Rewarm Gradually

- Once dressed, move gently: walk around, swing your arms, or do a light shuffle.
- Movement warms you from the inside and helps your circulation recover safely.
- Eat something and sip a warm, sweet drink - shivering uses a lot of energy.

About Shivering

Shivering after a swim is a normal part of rewarming and varies from person to person. However, shivering in the water, violent, uncontrollable shivering, or shivering that suddenly stops are warning signs and need action.

“Have easy-to-put-on clothes like joggers or an oversized fleece — cold fingers don't do zips or buttons! Simple layers make all the difference.”

— Clare, Vancouver Island, Canada

“Cut up an old yoga mat or sleeping mat into two or three pieces to stand on when changing to keep the chill of the ground off your feet.”

— Danya, Cambridge, UK

“When taking off my swim robe I don't unzip it fully. I step out of the robe with the zipper still connected. When you come out of the water you can easily step back into your robe and zip up.”

— Heather, Connecticut, USA

“After a cold swim, I find the quickest way to warm up after getting dressed, is to walk. Walking for 15 minutes or so really warms me up.”

— Alison, Clevedon, UK

Next: what afterdrop is - and how to rewarm safely.



THE AFTERDROP

Afterdrop is the continued fall in core temperature after leaving cold water, typically within 15–40 minutes post-swim.

It happens because heat loss continues after you exit the water, especially from wet skin in cold air and wind.

As circulation increases during rewarming, blood pressure can drop and heat is redistributed, which may lead to dizziness, shivering, or collapse - even if you felt fine at first.

What It Can Cause

- Increasing shivering
- Dizziness or nausea
- Poor coordination or confusion
- In severe cases: collapse or hypothermia



The delay is what makes afterdrop dangerous — you can feel great before symptoms hit.

How to Reduce the Risk

- Get dry and dressed quickly - core and head first
- Get out of the wind
- Warm up gradually (no hot showers or sudden intense heat)
- Eat something and sip a warm drink
- Stay with your swim buddy until you both feel normal
- Don't drive until fully warm

Exiting the water early makes afterdrop much easier to manage.

Be a good swim buddy. No one should be left alone after a cold swim. Someone who looks fine getting out may be shivering or dizzy 10–15 minutes later. Stay together until everyone is warm, steady, and safe.

The Danger of Post-Swim Hot Showers



Avoid jumping straight into a hot shower after cold-water swimming. Sudden rewarming causes blood vessels in the skin and limbs to open quickly, which can lead to a drop in blood pressure while your body is still cold. This can cause dizziness, fainting, or collapse. Wait until your shivering has eased and you feel warmer and steadier before showering. Gradual rewarming is safer.

What About Saunas?



Short sauna sessions after cold-water swimming can be safer than hot showers, as they warm the body gradually, allowing circulation and core temperature to rise in a controlled way. Avoid very hot saunas if you're still cold, shaky, or light-headed - a sauna is not a way to recover from being too cold.



BEFORE YOU GO



Getting into cold water is always a challenge - and that's part of its power.

Every swim asks something slightly different of you. Some days the water feels calm and welcoming; other days it feels sharp, challenging, and wild. With experience, you don't stop feeling the cold - you simply learn how to meet it with more awareness, steadier breathing, and better judgement.

When you prepare well, listen closely to your body, and respect the conditions, cold-water swimming can be not just exhilarating, but deeply grounding.

Above all, **swim your own swim.**



ALICE GOODRIDGE

COLD-WATER SWIMMING SPECIALIST

I'm Alice Goodridge, a cold-water swimmer, coach, and writer based in the Cairngorms National Park, Scotland.

I'm an ultra-marathon swimmer and ice swimmer, with many years of experience swimming year-round in open water. From long-distance swims to freezing winter conditions, I've spent a great deal of time learning how the body and mind respond to cold - and how to manage it safely.

Through my writing, coaching, and community work, I focus on practical cold-water safety, building confidence gradually, and helping swimmers develop the awareness and judgement that matter most in challenging conditions.

My approach is simple: respect the water, prepare well, and put safety before bravado. Cold water doesn't need conquering - it needs listening to.

Take it slowly. Stay safe. Stay curious. Look after yourself - and each other.

Happy Swimming!

Alice

Stay in touch

I share cold-water safety guidance, seasonal insights, and updates on new resources - and I run cold-water swims, retreats, and coaching in Scotland.

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Curious about cold water or have a question? Drop me an email, I'd love to hear from you - alice@swimwilduk.com

If you'd like to keep up to date, you can join my mailing list [HERE!](#)