

## Solo Swimming to Rottnest – The Medical Risks

Although the level of fitness required is obvious, the real dangers of swimming solo to Rottnest are often under appreciated. The 20km to Rottnest is much longer than most mass participation open water swims. You may be concerned about sharks, stingers, sea sickness or being hit by a boat but by far the biggest medical risk is HYPOTHERMIA (low body temperature).

The water in the channel is cool and you will be exposed to it for many hours. Given long enough hypothermia is inevitable. Conditions such as water temperature, swell and average swim time vary from year to year but hypothermia should always be considered a risk. Overall we know from past experience and extensive research that anywhere between a quarter and a half of the solo field may become hypothermic. A few will become so hypothermic that they will need to be hospitalized. In its most severe form hypothermia can be deadly.

As hypothermia becomes more severe your co-ordination and judgment will become impaired. Eventually you are so confused and your judgment is so impaired that you risk death by drowning. Scarily a hypothermic swimmer will be too confused to recognise how sick and at risk they are.

All solo swimmers need to consider themselves at risk of hypothermia – being fit enough to swim to Rottnest by itself won't protect you. We know that the factors that make you most at risk are any of:

- Low body fat
- Slow swim time
- First time competitors
- Limited open water experience

So if you are slim, swimming your first solo and think you will be in the water for more than 6 hours (i.e. you are not an elite level swimmer) your risk of becoming seriously hypothermic is real! Given the high risk of the solo swim, every solo swimmer and their support crew need to understand hypothermia, how it presents and how to guard against it.

As a swimmer ask yourself am I ready for this race? Do I fall into one of the higher risk groups? Am I well enough insulated to last that long in the water?

During the race make sure you maintain an intake of sugar in one form or another (e.g. sports drinks, jelly beans, "carboshotz") as glucose is the fuel that your body uses to generate heat.

It isn't possible to measure your temperature during the race so (with the support of his/her crew) your skipper takes ultimate responsibility for your wellbeing. It is therefore your skipper who takes the ultimate responsibility as to when you must be taken out of the water.

Trust your skipper and support crew to think for you and recognise the signs of hypothermia (ideally your own support crew should include a doctor, nurse or paramedic) and help you out of the water before your mild hypothermia becomes severe!