Drowning Treatment

Self-Care at Home

The goal of home care is to safely rescue the victim and begin first aid. In a near-drowning emergency, the sooner the rescue and first aid begin, the greater the victim's chance of survival. Do not endanger yourself in rescuing the victim during this process.

- **Rescue options to reach the drowning victim in the water**
  - Throw a rope with a buoyant object.
  - Use a long stick.
  - Bring a canoe alongside the victim and tow the victim to shore. Do not haul the victim into the boat because it may cause the boat to capsize, and both of you will be in the water. Cold water may render the victim too hypothermic to grasp objects within their reach or to hold while being pulled to safety.
  - As a last resort, you can attempt a swimming rescue if you are sufficiently trained in water rescue. Do not attempt a rescue beyond your capabilities. Otherwise, you may harm yourself.
    - For a swimming rescue, approach the person from behind while trying to calm the victim as you move closer. A panicked victim can pull you down.
    - Grab a piece of clothing or cup a hand or arm under the victim's chin and pull the person face up to shore while providing special care to ensure a straight head-neck-back alignment especially if you think the person has spine injuries.
    - The best option would be to float the victim on a board while towing to shore.
  - **Rescue options for someone who has fallen through the ice**
    - Do not walk on the ice to rescue someone.
    - Instead, throw a rope or offer a long stick to pull the victim out and across on the ice onto the person's belly to distribute the weight as evenly as possible.
    - Avoid having the victim try to climb on the ice edge because it results in more ice breaking.
- If the victim is unconscious, tie a rope around your waist, secure the other end, and slide out on the ice on your belly to reach the victim.
- Another technique is to form a human chain with everyone lying down to reach the victim.

**First aid for a near-drowning victim**

- The focus of the first aid for a near-drowning victim in the water is to get oxygen into the lungs without aggravating any suspected neck injury.
- If the victim's breathing has stopped, begin mouth-to-mouth rescue breathing as soon as you safely can. This could mean starting the breathing process in the water.
- Continue to breathe for the person every 5 seconds while moving the victim to the shore.
- If the airway is obstructed making breathing impossible, perform the Heimlich maneuver to clear it by bear hugging the victim from behind with your arms around the victim's stomach and using the thumb side of a closed fist with your other hand on top of the fist to pull in and up. Continue these thrusts until the airway is cleared.
- Chest compressions in the water are difficult to do without a flat surface that does not give way and are reserved until such a surface is available.
- Once on shore, reassess the victim's breathing and circulation (heartbeat and pulse). If there is breathing and circulation without suspected spine injury, place the person in recovery position (lying on the stomach, arms extended at the shoulder level and bent, head on the side with the leg on the same side drawn up at a right angle to the torso) to keep the airway clear and to allow the swallowed water to drain. If there is no breathing, begin CPR. Continue CPR (mouth-to-mouth breathing and chest compressions) until help arrives or the person revives.
- Keep the person warm by removing wet clothing and covering with warm blankets to prevent hypothermia.
- Remain with the recovering person until emergency medical personnel have arrived.

**Medical Treatment**

Someone with no symptoms after a near drowning will be observed in the emergency department for 6-12 hours and should follow up with a doctor in 1-3 days.

Someone with symptoms will be treated as follows:

- CPR if not breathing
- Oxygen for people with low oxygenation
- Breathing tube and machine if person is not breathing properly
- Heated intravenous fluids to increase low blood pressure and to warm up the victim
- Stomach tube to decrease abdominal distension that may cause vomiting
• Immobilization of neck with a collar for suspected neck injury
• Invasive monitors if person has cardiac or respiratory instability
• Bronchodilators to decrease airway spasm
• Antibiotics for lung infections
• Steroids to decrease lung inflammation
• Treatment for shock and hypothermia
• Hyperbaric chamber for divers with decompression sickness (the bends)
• Supportive care and counseling for the person and his or her family

For more information, read the complete article, Drowning

WebMD Medical Reference from eMedicineHealth
Reviewed by Ann Edmundson, MD on May 24, 2006
Last updated: May 24, 2006
This information is not intended to replace the advice of a doctor.
© 2006 WebMD Inc. All rights reserved.