

Paddle Clothing

Learn How to Reduce the Risk of Hypothermia – (See separate document to learn about Hypothermia.)

Appropriate Paddle Clothing for Cold Water:

Low Cost Solutions: 1.) Layers of insulation and windbreaker, wet shoes, wool socks, and helmet liner. 2.) Wetsuit and windbreaker, wet shoes, wool socks and helmet liner.

Higher Cost Solution: Dry-suit, layers of insulation, wet shoes, wool socks, and helmet liner.

Wetsuits are made of Neoprene. They come in thin varieties such as the “Hydroskin” or thicker versions such as the “Farmer John/Jane”. NRS now has a two-piece thick version that will provide more flexibility. Wetsuits should fit tight against the skin to work correctly. The body can then heat the thin layer of water between the suit and the skin. A cool breeze on a wet wetsuit can be cold. You must have something to break the wind.

A **windbreaker** could be a cheap rain suit, breathable Gortex hiking shells, or anything in-between. The windbreaker should include both pants and jacket and must be waterproof.

Insulation could be fleece purchased at a garage sale or high-tech insulation purchased from paddle sports suppliers. Either way, it must be 100% polyester and contain NO COTTON.

Wet-shoes are made of Neoprene just like wetsuits. They should be just big enough to let you wear one pair of thick wool socks, jell inserts, and not be too tight. If they are too big, or if you wear multiple pairs of socks, they will retain too much water. Be sure to get wet-shoes with some tread on the bottom and I suggest a thin layer of tough plastic and some jell pads to help shield your feet from feeling the rocks. Water shoes or lace up tennis shoes will work to get you started if the water and weather are not too cold. In cold weather you need the Neoprene to help keep your feet warm. Flip-flops are not suitable even in hot weather because they come off and get lost.

A **helmet liner** is a thin Neoprene skull cap that snugly covers your head. Some are made from fleece. A Neoprene helmet liner will help eliminate the “iceberg” headache when rolling in freezing water. It can also be quickly added under your helmet or hat to help you warm up.

A **dry-suit** is a waterproof shell/suit that seals at the ankles, wrists and neck to keep all water out. A dry-suit does not insulate. It is just a shell. One or more layers of insulation are needed to provide warmth. By varying the number and thickness of the insulation, the dry-suit can be very versatile. Some dry-suits are designed to remove most of the wetness caused by perspiration and at the same time be waterproof. In my experience, Gortex is the only breathable material that REALLY pulls the moisture away. I have wasted good money on other items that claim to be breathable.

A dry-suit is a wonderful thing if it will remain cold all day. A dry-suit can be uncomfortably hot if the weather should warm much in the afternoon. My personal limit is about 70F with very thin insulation. With other types of paddle clothing, you can take off the top or bottom, or open a zipper for ventilation. With a dry-suit, you are committed to keep it on and zipped. You can however, add or remove layers of insulation.

Advice (What to Buy): Start with the low cost solution number 1. Even if you have a dry-suit, there will be many times you can use layers of insulation and hiking shells (windbreakers). Then add a wet-suit to your paddling wardrobe when it gets colder. If you get serious about paddling in winter weather or very cold water, then buy a dry-suit. I suggest you begin by wearing a bathing suit for underwear. A bathing suit will dry fast and let you change in front of your friends if needed.

Cotton Warning: For cold conditions don't wear cotton. Not even cotton underwear. Cotton fibers absorb water and/or perspiration and will take forever to dry out. In contrast, wearing wet cotton shirt might help you stay cool on a very hot summer day. Just remember that cotton is a bad deal for cold situations that might involve getting wet.

How Much to Wear / How Warm to Be: If you are just comfortable when dry, you are likely not dressed for a cold-water swim. It is best to over dress a little and use other means to get cooled off.

You can cool off by rolling, wading, splashing water on face, etc. If your torso is warm, the small amount of skin exposed with your hands and face will not matter much. Circulating warm blood will help keep the exposed areas warm.

Always consider how you will get/stay warm after you get wet. Even a soaked wetsuit can feel cold on a cloudy day with a breeze. Dawning a windbreaker, spray-skirt, PDF, and getting inside a closed deck kayak can make a huge difference.

Managing the Risk:

People with an "It won't happen to me" attitude, are serious accidents waiting to happen. You must be prepared for the unexpected. Analyze what the unexpected could be. Prepare for the reasonable worst-case scenario. For instance, kayakers should always be prepared for the consequences of a short swim. Kayaking is a "wet" sport, not a dry one.

Be sure to consider the air temperature, water temperature and potential time in the water. The lake, river, paddle group and your skill should all level play into this equation. Heat loss takes time and a temperature difference.

Appropriate Paddle Clothing and Actions for Hot Weather and Hot Water:

- 1.) Dress Cool. This might be a time for a thin wet cotton shirt.
- 2.) Protect your skin from the sun – sunscreen or thin long sleeves
- 3.) Stay wet if possible
- 4.) Drink enough water that you perspire as expected and you must urinate regularly. Drink before you get thirsty. Avoid caffeine and alcohol as they have the opposite affect of hydrating with water. Watch your electrolyte replacement.
- 5.) Protect your eyes from reflections with polarized sun glasses.
- 6.) Wear a hat that will provide some sun protection for your head and forehead. Sunscreen on your forehead might get in your eyes and burn.
- 7.) Monitor your body closely and take breaks in the shade as needed.
- 8.) You can get sick or die from getting too hot just like you can from getting too cold.

Helmet Source

<http://www.whitewaterhelmet.com/> - excellent helmet for the price, guaranteed to fit or they will send you more shims. Can be made to fit egg shape heads.

Paddle Clothing and Gear Sources

<http://www.nrsweb.com/> - most complete source – 800-635-5202

<http://www.coloradokayak.com/> - good source – 888-265-2925

<http://www.mountainsports.com/> - good prices

<http://www.kcpaddler.com/>

Garage sales – An inexpensive source for fleece. Some ski clothing is suit able for paddling.

Revised: January 16, 2013 by Chris Collins