

Small Craft Recovery of Man Overboard and Subsequent Treatment.

It's maybe not really a subject you may want to consider as you step aboard your craft, but in the highly unlikely event of finding yourself in the water, it would be nice to think your crew could rescue you and then make sure you recover from the experience.



For recovery operations on larger ships, IMO provides guidance in MSC1_Circ1182 “Guide to recovery techniques”, but for small craft, despite the greater likelihood of a person falling overboard, this is often a subject that skippers fail to consider. Operators of small craft, including mooring and leisure craft, should plan for and then exercise a situation where a person falls overboard. Equally important, they should pay special attention to the crew's training for subsequent action and care.

Recovery of the person overboard

First consider the freeboard of your boat – you will soon realise that trying to get a person out of the water is not as simple as it looks. The best method of recovery for low freeboard vessels is to manually drag the person over the sponson and then lay them down in the boat.

The RYA offers some useful tips;

- A lifting strop with attached line will make hoisting the casualty easier, or just lasso a line around the casualty and tie the person to the boat.
- If you are fortunate you will have a block and tackle or purchase system to hoist someone from the water. A 4:1 system is usually the minimum purchase that should be used but consideration must be given to finding somewhere high and strong enough to attach it.
- A swim platform is an ideal place to retrieve a casualty if conditions permit. If you drag an unconscious person onto the swim platform it may not be possible to get them further onboard, so secure them to the platform.
- Launching a liferaft offers a floating platform close to the sea into which the casualty can be lifted. Ensure the raft is tied to the boat before launching. The casualty can be warmed and treated in the raft or lifted back aboard the boat.
- Ladders allow the casualty to assist in their own rescue by utilising their stronger leg muscles if they are fit to do so.
- A ladder or scrambling net should ideally extend 600mm below the waterline so the casualty can place their foot on the bottom rung. However, a line from the aft cleat draped in the water to an amidships cleat or windlass can provide a step.
- If the dinghy is accessible and weather conditions allow, it offers a platform for either the person in the water to help themselves back aboard or for a crew to assist the casualty. Tubes on an inflatable dinghy can be partially deflated to help retrieval.

Now the casualty is onboard – have you thought about what to do next?



Crews are working in areas where they are unlikely to have medical assistance via search and rescue services or an ambulance in the first twenty minutes following illness or injury. This delay puts considerable pressure on crews, because rather than recovering someone from the water, a rescue involves prevention of death from major loss of blood or asphyxiation, which can occur after about **three minutes**.

Current thinking is often overly-focused on how to prevent hypothermia. Research has shown that it takes at least thirty minutes of immersion in Northern European waters for crewmembers to even start to become seriously hypothermic, and endurance in these waters is usually measured in hours before the victim succumbs to a hypothermic death. Casualties recovered before that time are just simply 'cold'. However, physiological reactions to cold-water, particularly cold water shock, play a major part in immersion related deaths after an unplanned entry into the water! Cold water shock, which is completely different from hypothermia, kills over half of all UK water victims, and does so in the first 3 minutes of immersion. While this sounds dramatic, the effects are documented and sadly highlighted in some recent tragedies.

Standard HSE or STCW Elementary First Aid courses are designed to enable crews to look after the patient until an ambulance arrives. They rely on crews' recall of course content from many years before, and also on practical skills that were taught but may never have been practised. ***Standard first aid courses and their associated equipment cannot guarantee survival of the casualty while at sea.***

UK Search and Rescue organisations realised this and have radically altered their training in the last 10 years. Casualty care courses coupled with treatment check cards have become the norm. The treatment check cards guide casualty-carers through the required treatment that should be considered, thereby removing reliance on memory in the heat of an incident.

First Aid training should move towards an Immediate Emergency Care course, taught with check-cards and using the equipment and methods similar to those adopted by Search and Rescue responders. This will produce a commonality of approach and equipment, promoting effective treatment until handover can be arranged. This can only benefit the patient. One example of such a course is described at <https://www.saviourmedical.com/treatment-checkcards>

Skippers should plan and exercise this casualty scenario – it may save your life!