

37 A comparison of the protection against immersion hypothermia provided by Coast Guard anti-exposure clothing in calm versus rough seas

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The purpose of this study was to compare the protection against immersion hypothermia provided by various types of Coast Guard operational clothing to survivors of mishaps in calm versus rough seas. Eight garment ensembles were evaluated: 1) flight suit (control); 2) full wet suit and 3) shorty wet suit (tight-fitting "wet" garments); 4) aviation anti-exposure coveralls, 5) boatcrew anti-exposure coveralls, and 6) thermal float coat (loose-fitting "wet" garments); 7) dry suit. 8) survival suit ("dry" garments). Mean calm-water temperature was 10°C. Rough-water mean temperature was 11.1°C with 4-6 foot swells, occasional 4-foot breaks, 2-3 foot wind-waves and 0-3 knots current. Eight volunteer Coast Guard crewmen wore each garment-ensemble once in each of the two sea conditions. Dependent variables were rectal temperature, groin skin temperature, back skin temperature, heart rate, and subjective evaluations of warmth, tightness of garment fit, and amount of cold water flushing. The results showed significantly faster mean rectal temperature cooling rates and significantly larger declines in skin temperatures in rough seas than in calm seas for subjects wearing the float coat, aviation anti-exposure coveralls and boatcrew coveralls. Heart rates were significantly faster in rough seas than in calm seas for all garments. Rectal and skin temperature changes were positively correlated with each other and with subjective evaluation of cold water flushing, but they were negatively correlated with warmth and tightness of fit. In general, "dry" garments provided better protection than did "wet" garments in both sea conditions, and tight-fitting "wet" garments provided better protection than did loose-fitting "wet" garments in rough seas but not in calm seas. These results demonstrate that survivors in rough seas may have significantly greater risk from immersion hypothermia than previously assumed based on survival time projections from calm-water studies.