

Popular impressions to the contrary, relatively few victims of hypothermia die in extreme conditions, stumbling through blizzards or fighting the bite of arctic winds. To begin with, relatively few people go out in that kind of weather, and those that do are generally prepared. Most victims of hypothermia die in a much more dozey kind of way, in temperate seasons and with the air temperature nowhere near freezing. Typically, they are caught by an unforeseen change of conditions or combination of changes—a sudden drop in temperature, a cold pelting rain, the realization that they are lost—for which they are emotionally or physically under-equipped. Nearly always, they compound the problem by doing something foolhardy—leaving a well-marked path in search of a shortcut, blundering deeper into the woods when they would have been better off staying put, fording streams that get them only wetter and colder.

Such was the unfortunate fate of Richard Salinas, who in 1990 went hiking with a friend in Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina. Caught by fading light, they headed back to their car but somehow became separated. Salinas was an experienced hiker and all he had to do was follow a well-defined trail down a mountain to a parking lot. He never made it. Three days later, his jacket and knapsack were found abandoned, miles into the woods. His body was discovered two months later, snagged on branches in the little Linville River. As far as anyone can surmise, he had left the trail in search of a shortcut, got lost, plunged deep into the woods, panicked, and plunged deeper still, until at last hypothermia fatally robbed him of his senses.

Hypothermia is a gradual and insidious sort of trauma. It overtakes you literally by degrees as your body temperature falls and your natural responses grow sluggish and disordered. In such a state, Salinas had abandoned his possessions and soon after made the desperate and irrational decision to try to cross the rain-swollen river, which in normal circumstances he would have realized could take him only farther away from his goal. On the night he got lost, the weather was dry and the temperature in the 40s. Had he kept his jacket and stayed out of the

MAIN IDEAS

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Hypothermia victims usually die in less dramatic ways than many would think.

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Even experienced hikers can fall victim to the dangers of hypothermia

Hypothermia in the woods takes time to kill and may be often avoidable.

According to Wales

water, he would have had an uncomfortably chilly night and a story to tell. Instead, he died.

A person suffering hypothermia experiences several progressive stages, beginning, as you would expect, with mild and then increasingly violent shivering as the body tries to warm itself with muscular contractions, proceeding on to profound weariness, heaviness of movement, a distorted sense of time and distance, and increasingly helpless confusion resulting in a tendency to make imprudent or illogical decisions and a failure to observe the obvious. Gradually the sufferer grows thoroughly disoriented and subject to increasingly dangerous hallucinations—including the decidedly cruel misconception that he is not freezing but burning up. Many victims tear off clothing, fling away their gloves, or crawl out of their sleeping bags. The annals of trail deaths are full of stories of hikers found half naked lying in snowbanks just outside their tents. When this stage is reached, shivering ceases as the body just gives up and apathy takes over. The heart rate falls and brain waves begin to look like a drive across the prairies. By this time, even if the victim is found, the shock of revival may be more than his body can bear.

This was neatly illustrated by an incident reported in the January 1997 issue of *Outside* magazine. In 1980, according to the article, sixteen Danish seamen issued a Mayday call, donned life jackets, and jumped into the North Sea as their vessel sank beneath them. There they bobbed for ninety minutes before a rescue ship was able to lift them from the water. Even in summer, the North Sea is so perishingly cold that it can kill a person immersed in it in as little as thirty minutes, so the survival of all sixteen men was cause for some jubilation. They were wrapped in blankets and guided below, where they were given a hot drink and abruptly dropped dead—all sixteen of them.

But enough of arresting anecdotes. Let's toy with this fascinating malady ourselves.

I was in New Hampshire now, which pleased me, because we had recently moved to the state, so I was naturally interested to explore it. Vermont and New Hampshire are so snugly proximate

The stages of hypothermia produce increasingly dramatic and dangerous results.

Once deep hypothermia has set in, it is difficult to revive a victim, even if found alive.