

The risk of hypothermia when cycling

What is hypothermia?

The internet has many articles about hypothermia but I think the best way to understand it is to watch this short YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqDti-6BeRk>

I have encountered hypothermia whilst cycling just twice in 26 years.

The first time was in 2013 on a 200 km Audax ride, the New Cheltenham Flyer. You'll find this incident described in the article I wrote for Arrivee, the Audax magazine. There's a link to it here: <https://www.stroudvalleycyclingclub.org.uk/articles/>

The second time was much more recent and occurred on Thursday 8th January 2026, during Ian Cooper's 55 mile ride to Morton. Ian was accompanied by me, Paul Rothwell and Dave Hassall. Nick Carter rode with us to the café stop at The Hideout at Tortworth but he headed for home afterwards because of the forecast of rain during the afternoon. In retrospect this was a very wise decision indeed.

The four of us pressed on to the Anchor Inn at Morton for lunch and we encountered light rain on the way.

Lunch at the Anchor Inn was, as always, very good but Dave commented that he could see the rain had become heavier and so it proved when we left to get back on our bikes.

I knew that Storm Goretti was due to arrive at about 6.00 pm but it actually made an appearance rather earlier and by 2.00 pm the wind was getting up and blowing the rain into our faces.

I was wearing a base layer, my long sleeved club top, thermally lined longs, a buff, overshoes and a rain jacket.

That is normally adequate for a winter ride in temperatures above freezing but the conditions were becoming challenging as the temperature fell to 4C but with a feel-like temperature of -6C because of the wind and rain.

I do suffer from cold hands and I was wearing winter gloves with a silk inner glove.

However, the heavy rain was saturating my gloves and my hands started to get very cold.

As we approached The Frocester Inn I decided to stop and change my gloves for a dry pair which I had tucked into my jersey pocket after looking at the weather forecast before setting off.

Dave Hassall had headed home when we passed through Dursley so only Ian and Paul were with me at this point.

I suspected that changing my gloves would take a little while so I told Ian that he and Paul should continue so that they retained their body temperature in the conditions, which were now very difficult, with constant driving rain propelled by high winds.

Ian and Paul headed on and I stopped and removed my wet gloves.

That was fairly easy but replacing them with the dry gloves proved to be very difficult.

The dry gloves are very tight and my cold hands proved incapable of holding them properly and fitting them onto my frozen fingers.

A local chap who was walking with an umbrella stopped to talk to me about his uncle, who had cycled from Land's End to John O'Groats years ago and we chatted about my own experience of LeJog back in 2000.

He sympathised with my glove predicament and I said that I was thinking of continuing with just my bare hands but he very sensibly said that would not be a good idea.

He headed off and I moved under the canopy in front of the inn, which at least protected me from the rain.

I eventually managed to get both dry gloves on although the right hand one wasn't properly on and left part of the back of my hand exposed.

I felt dizzy and I knew that my mind wasn't working as well as it should be.

But I knew I didn't have far to go to get home.

It was now about 3.00 pm, the weather was continuing to go downhill and darkness would arrive soon.

I also knew that I needed to get warmed up by cycling hard because I was really cold by the time I resumed my journey, now on my own.

I arrived at Stonehouse quickly and pushed on past Wycliffe College, through Ebley and then ground to a halt on Westward Road, where the traffic was heavy.

The Cainscross Road was even busier, with traffic outside Marling School and Stroud High School reducing me to walking pace.

By the time I arrived in Stroud I was very cold and when I arrived home I was in the grip of hypothermia.

Taking off my cycling gear was difficult as I shivered in my lounge and my long suffering wife ran the shower.

The water was lovely and hot and after a couple of minutes I started to feel much better.

I ate a snack and rehydrated then felt very sleepy so I retired to bed for an hour of deep sleep.

When I got up I felt reasonably normal and spent a quiet evening in front of the telly.

What conclusions do I draw from this experience and my previous encounter with hypothermia?

Both incidents occurred in a temperature of around 4C and heavy rain driven by strong winds.

When it is dry and cold I can generate enough body heat if I wear suitable clothing.

But when the temperature drops, it rains heavily and the wind gets up I can't generate enough body heat to stay warm.

I am a skinny 64 kg so I lack the body fat to provide much natural insulation.

I would have benefited from an additional layer and I am now wearing my short sleeved summer club jersey on top of my base layer.

I've now invested in a pair of leather ski gloves, as recommended by Paul Rothwell, who rates them highly.

I am sure that I will soon get the opportunity to try them out on a wet ride.

Hypothermia sneaks up on you.

The symptoms include confusion, dizziness and illogical thinking.

My thought at the Frocester Inn about cycling on with no gloves was definitely illogical.

If I had been thinking more rationally I would have changed my normal route to avoid the heavy traffic along the Cainscross Road because I could have gone down to Sainsburys and cycled up Dudbridge Hill, which would also have warmed me up a little.

If you have watched the video you'll have heard about paradoxical undressing, which commonly occurs in the later stages of severe hypothermia.

I console myself that at least I spared Ian and Paul that never to be forgotten experience.

So although most of us will never encounter hypothermia I hope that my experience is of interest and that having an awareness of this phenomenon may prove useful to you or someone you are riding with at some point in the future.