



IMMERSION SUITS - “If you’re not afloat, your chances of survival are remote”.

An immersion suit is designed to save your life if you are forced to abandon ship into the cold waters of the north Atlantic. Without protection, you can drown within a few minutes from the shock of unexpected entry into cold water. Even if you survive the initial shock, you soon lose the ability to swim and keep your head above water.

Do immersion suits work? Ask the 6-man crew of the fishing vessel Atlantic Prize, forced to abandon ship on a freezing November night in 1998. While they had only about 4 minutes to don their immersion suits and abandon ship, they spent several harrowing hours in 6 degree water awaiting rescue. Those six men owe their lives to their immersion suits. Training and composure played a major role in their ability to survive, but without the immersion suits they surely would have perished.

Advantages of an immersion suit

An approved immersion suit keeps you afloat, keeps your body heat inside the suit, and keeps water out. It covers all your body except the face. The hood forms a seal around your face to keep water out – a flap may cover your mouth and nose. The zipper and seams do not allow water to seep in. It is very important to keep out cold water that could cool your body, because you could be in the water for hours before being rescued.

While floating you face-up, an immersion suit acts like your own personal life raft. Its bright color provides a target for rescuers to see.

Some newer immersion suits are made of a flexible material that allows crew members to move more easily. If the ship is in danger, crew can put on immersion suits and still perform emergency tasks and handle lines. If crew members wait until the last minute to don their suits, they may have no time if the ship suddenly capsizes.

Taking care of your immersion suit

Regularly inspect your immersion suit to make sure it is kept in good working condition:

- Examine the suit for rips, tears, and deterioration. Repairs should be made by the manufacturer or an authorized retailer competent in immersion suit repairs.
- Make sure the zipper works smoothly. Check that the teeth are aligned. Wax the front and back of the zipper with beeswax or paraffin wax.
- If the suit has a back pillow, at least once a year manually blow up the pillow to make sure it inflates fully and remains inflated for 24 hours.
- Check that the reflective tape is in place.
- Check that the whistle is attached in its proper place and in good working order.
- Check that the light is attached in its proper place and that the battery is not past the manufacturer’s expiry. (The light is activated by salt water.)
- If the suit has been immersed in salt water, thoroughly rinse and dry it before storing it.
- Fold it according to the manufacturers instructions, and store it in a dry place where it is out of direct sunlight and easy to get if you must abandon ship.

Emergency drills

In order to ensure that all crew members are familiar with emergency procedures, the master should conduct regular emergency drills, particularly when there has been a crew change. These should include procedures for putting on immersion suits. In an emergency, you may need to put on your suit in darkness and rough sea, and with the vessel listing badly. So, it is important to practice getting your suit from storage and then putting it on within one minute.

The effects of sudden, unexpected cold water immersion are deadly. Be prepared!

