



# How to Survive After a Shipwreck

The odds of being shipwrecked are nil if you never set foot on a sea vessel. However, most people take a boat, ferry, ship or ocean liner trip at least once in their lives, so it can be handy to know what to do should a fairly uncommon yet possible event occur, that of being shipwrecked. Having the basic knowledge of how to survive with whatever you have can be helpful information to draw on from the back of your mind. This article presumes survival after any crash and sinking of a sea vessel and assumes you're now in the sea or on nearby but uninhabited land.

## Steps

**1 Don't panic.** Before all else, keep a calm head and demeanor. Staying calm will allow you to continue to think clearly and to keep your energy intact. Panicking will only use up energy and cause you to lose the ability to think straight. Moreover, maintaining a calm, demeanor will help to reassure others who are with you and keep them calmer too.

- Before leaving a ship or boat that is sinking, if you have the time, ensure that you are wearing long sleeved clothes and pants. Try your absolute hardest to get a life jacket if you're not already wearing one; staying buoyant is vital.
- See [How to escape a sinking ship](#) for precise details on the moment of departure from the sinking vessel.

**2 Examine yourself.** Before anything else, reassure yourself that you're okay, whether you're bobbing in water or in a lifeboat. If you have any cuts or [wounds](#), treat them. If the wounds or cuts are deep, wrap them up snugly but not to the point where it hurts. If there is bleeding, apply pressure to the wound or on either side of it. Obviously, some treatment options cannot be performed unless and until you're out of the water but do what you can for now.

- Hypothermia is a real risk when staying for any length in water, and the colder the water, the faster are the chances of it happening. Once safely aboard a boat, raft or land, wrap yourself warmly in blankets, clothing or anything else available to increase your body temperature.
- Be aware that shock is a real possibility. Ask others for help.

**3 Assess the well being of others around you.** Do the same checks that you have done for yourself, only on others now. Obviously, some treatment options cannot be performed unless and until you're out of the water.

- Treat any victims who are suffering from shock. Loosen their clothing if it's tight and have them lay down with their head lower and their legs slightly elevated. Keep them warm and speak soothingly to them. See [How to treat shock](#) for exact details.
- Treat any concussion. Keep the victim in the recovery position and apply cold compresses. See [How to treat a concussion](#) for exact details.

**4 If you're still in the water and lifeboats are not available, make use of debris.** Clamber onto anything that could be used like a [raft](#) or cling onto floating debris. Miscellaneous debris can often be turned into makeshift rafts by tying together wood, barrels, floating items, etc. To keep together with others, try lashing all lifeboats or makeshift items together. To protect your skin and minimize dehydration, look for ways to make shelter from the sun from clothing, cloth, tarps, sails, etc.; some things might be caught up with debris. Ultimately, aim to get out of the water as soon as possible; swimming, treading water and even maintaining a float will drain your energy and lower your body temperature.

**5 Keep all survivors together as much as possible.** Don't hesitate to take a leadership role and motivate people to remain in a group and boost morale. Explain quickly but authoritatively that staying together as a group improves everyone's chances of survival. Being part of a group creates greater safety in the face of dangers such as

predators, exhaustion, drowning, etc. and also acts as a source of comfort and support.

- If sharks encircle your group of survivors, stay together. Don't panic and stay linked; sharks are more likely to go for an individual. If anyone is bleeding, make them a priority for staying out of the water atop debris or in a lifeboat because their blood will attract sharks. Remove any shiny objects (especially jewelry and watches), to avoid catching the eyes of sharks, who might mistake these for fish scales. Should a shark attack, use any object to hit its eyes or gills; at the very least, the shark will know your group is going to retaliate.

**6 Consider whether it's possible to signal for help.** If you're in a lifeboat, it should be equipped with rescue flares; read the instructions and deploy them. Be prepared to let off more flares or smoke when you are sure potential rescuers are near, to help them to pinpoint your location. Only use flares and smoke when boats or rescuers are in sight.—You don't want to waste these precious resources.

- If you're wrecked near enough to land to get cell phone reception, dial for emergency services and ask for the Coastguard.
- If on land, use fire or other means to signal for help (see more details below).

**7 Head for land if relevant.** If you can see land, steer your craft toward it if you have control over moving the lifeboat. Hopefully there will be people able to help you if you do reach land. If not, you'll need to continue your survival tactics to cope with being stranded somewhere.

**8 Seek shelter.** If you reach land that isn't inhabited, make use of debris that has turned up with you (including any craft you've floated in on) and from items on the land. Natural shelters such as caves make good shelters. If you're desperate, you can hang some leaves on a branch that is big enough to cover you. Leaves can be your bedding but make sure they're not covered in bugs first.

- For ideas on quick shelters to build, see: [How to build a shelter in the jungle](#), [How to build a fast shelter in the wilderness](#) and [How to make a lean to shelter](#).
- Make a marker. Hang something brightly colored on a long stick where your shelter is situated: This serves as a locator point for you, other survivors, and for rescuers. If you are hot or cold, you shouldn't use your shirt because there may be deadly parasites that love flesh or you may get sunburned or too cold.

**9 Look around.** Is there anything that can help you? Quite often people miss essential items and either die or struggle to stay alive. Gather pieces of wood as you can use these for many things such as stoking fires, creating shelter, and fending off predators. Use leaves to create shelter roofs and bedding. Use reeds to lash together shelters and rafts or use them for food utensils and plates, etc.

- Salvage everything that you can from the shipwreck—that which is washing ashore or was brought with you. Everything may come in handy. You just never know, so save it all.

**10 Find food and water.** You may need to find food immediately if supplies aren't with the lifeboat or if they have been consumed. If you do have available food, immediately ration it and look for other food as well. If you have no food supplies, start looking.

- When you find water, always **filter** it. While water may look clean, it may harbor parasites or other sickening agents. If you're really thirsty and don't have time to wait to filter water, dig a trench about three inches (7.5cm) wide and deep enough until you find water a couple inches in the dirt. The water may not taste good but it's at least filtered. If you can, boil your water for 20 minutes before drinking. Never drink seawater; its high salt content means it is undrinkable.
- Food can be in the form of fruit, nuts, seeds, flowers, bananas, etc. but be wary of berries, leaves, brightly colored foods, fungi and foods you don't know at all. Thanks to human migration, some weeds such as dandelions and chicory grow in many parts of the world and are safe to eat.
- If you have any choice at all, prefer starches and fats over protein if you need to maintain hydration.
- Bugs are fine unless you notice this:
  - The bugs are easily found in open areas. Bugs that are not poisonous are more likely to hide, so that they're not eaten.
  - It has bright colored legs. This often means it's poisonous.

**11 Wait for rescue to arrive.** Continue doing everything needed to attract attention. This includes making messages; using body signals; using mirrors and reflectors; building fires; and setting off flares intermittently when you perceive rescue opportunity. See [How to attract attention when you need rescuing](#) for more details. In the meantime, remain focused on staying fed, watered, and properly sheltered. If you're with other people, stay together. For tips on thriving for a while in a deserted location, see [How to live on a deserted island](#).

- Keep cool by dipping yourself in the water.
- Keep warm by remaining in your shelter, wearing all the clothes you have, making fire if possible, and sheltering away from wind and rain. If you're still bobbing about on the sea, tuck your inner arms to your chest and keep still to stay warm, while sleeping often to conserve energy.
- Be vigilant about rescue scouts and be ready to attract their attention. If you're with others, set up an around-the-clock rotation for keeping watch for rescue.

## Community Q&A

### What is the best thing to wear in case of evacuation into a lifeboat?

Jonas DeMuro,  
M.D.

The most important is your life vest, in case you are thrown into the water. Ideally, you should dress in layers to be prepared for temperature changes.

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### What if a shark is nearby?

wikiHow  
Contributor

Sharks are usually not aggressive. As long as no one is bleeding it should be fine. If it attacks, punch it in the nose and try to swim away. Check out this article for more information on how to [Survive a Shark Attack](#).

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## Tips

- If you haven't taken swimming lessons before going on a boat, it would be advisable to learn.
- Before you head into the water, take off any heavy clothing, jewelry, and anything that will bind or weight you, especially your shoes.
- Large ships such as cruise liners can take hours or even days to sink and, in order to be rescued quickly, it's best to remain with the ship unless the crew has advised otherwise. Always put a life jacket on at the first sign of sinking and try to have a long sleeved top and long pants on to help with warmth.

## Warnings

- If the inside is flooding quickly, do not inflate your life jacket until you are outside. Otherwise, you might float to the top and be trapped inside the ship.

## Things You'll Need

- Life jacket
- Flares or other forms of signalling