

How does it feel...

## ...TO GET NITROGEN NARCOSIS AT 50M AND NOT DIE?

■ NITROGEN narcosis is what happens when divers go so deep that nitro stuffs up their brain. It's like being smashed, and the deeper you go, the more smashed you get.

On its own, being "narked" can't kill you – but when they're a few fathoms down, divers can suddenly decide it's a good idea to give their oxygen to a fish, for example. Confusion, paranoia and outright fear are other common symptoms. In the diver, not the fish.

The safest way to experience nitrogen narcosis – aka "rapture of the deep" – is to take water away so you can't drown. A hyperbaric

chamber is a dry environment that simulates depth pressure, and is often used to help divers with the bends. Or to help **RALPH** journalists write stories without dying.

Myself and three others crowd onto a bench in the chamber, along with a blown-up balloon and a polystyrene cup of pencils (we can't use biros, because the pressure would force the ink out). Air is pumped in – fast. By the time we've simulated two metres of "depth", I've popped my ears about 15 times to equalise the pressure and relieve agony. At 10m, the original 11 cubic metres of air has doubled to 22 and the compressed atmosphere is already heating up.

At 22m, the balloon is half its original size. The polystyrene cup is being battered as its tiny air-bubbles shrink. Pressure on our vocal cords makes us all sound like Donald Duck. We embark on a Disney version of "Tie Me Kangaroo Down".

We're 35m down and very hot six minutes after leaving the "surface". I feel like I've had five double vodkas, then got into bed with the electric blanket on. The guy operating the chamber tells us to whistle. I can't; the compressed air has been scrubbed free of moisture. Embarrassingly, I start to giggle. We hit bottom. There are five atmospheres packed into our little space – the same as 50m underwater. If I somehow stepped outside, the air now compressed into my lungs would expand them to about twice the size of my body. Bad look.

**The air compressed into my lungs would expand them to twice the size of my body**

My fellow travellers laugh hard about everything. We note that the balloon resembles a used condom. Hilarious. It feels like last call in a bar full of monkeys. And it's over 30°C.

A quiz is handed to us through an airlock, but it's impossible. Nitrogen bubbles are pressing on my nerve endings, slowing down messages. I can't do maths at the best of times.

If I was 50m under the waves, it would be dark, cold and confusing. I could drown or get the bends. It takes 20 minutes to decompress in the safety of the chamber. I'm not drunk anymore, and I don't have a hangover. Cool.

Ivan Smith

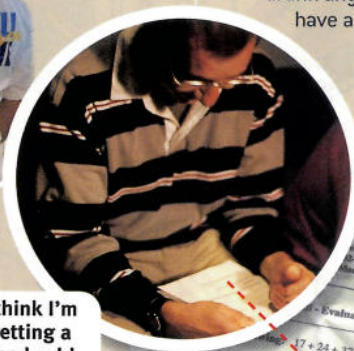
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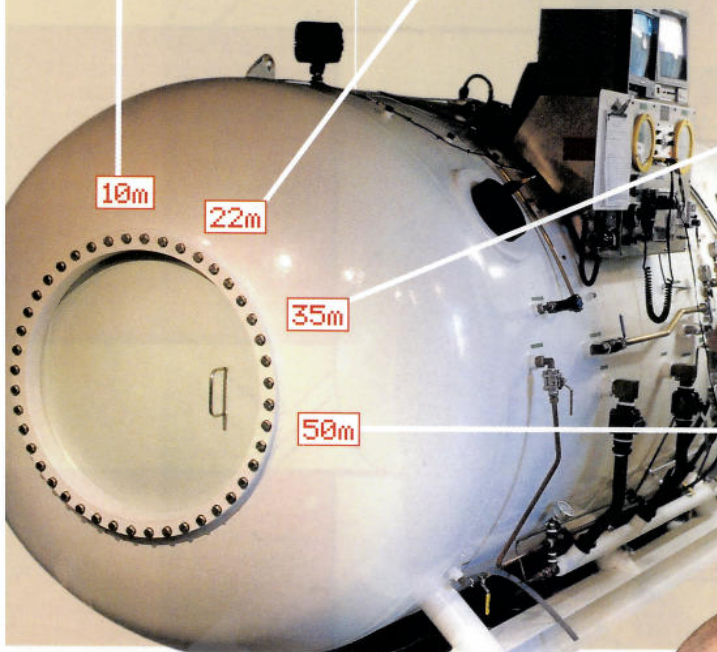
Hmm... farts still smell at 50m below



Body parts begin to change colour



I think I'm getting a head cold



## Tightarse tip

■ NEXT time a long-haired mate of yours drinks until he passes out, don't stop at shaving off one of his eyebrows. Shave him bald, sell his follicles to a wigmaker and you'll make heaps. Just make sure you cut carefully and close to the scalp to ensure maximum value – and use some of the proceeds to buy your "hair donor" a beer for his trouble. – J. Brown, Sydney, NSW

BE CROWNED "TIGHTARSE OF THE MONTH"

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