

# Life Jacket Checklist

When preparing for an outing,  
ask yourself:

- Do I have U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets?
- Have I read this pamphlet to increase my chances of survival?
- Have I selected the proper life jacket for my boating activity?
- Is my life jacket the right size according to the label, and does it fit correctly?
- Have I trial-tested my life jacket in shallow water?
- Does my life jacket keep my chin above the water and allow me to breathe easily?
- If my life jacket is an inflatable, have I checked the status of the inflator and made sure that the CO<sub>2</sub> cylinder is not punctured?
- If my life jacket is an inflatable, have I checked it for leaks in the last two months?
- If I'm a boat operator, have I checked my passengers' life jackets?

# Facts About Life Jackets

AN OVERVIEW OF TODAY'S CHOICES OF LIFE JACKETS  
AND A GUIDE TO THEIR PROPER USE AND CARE



It only works  
if you wear it!



Personal Flotation Device  
Manufacturers Association

| [pfdma.org](http://pfdma.org)



National Marine  
Manufacturers Association

| [nmma.org](http://nmma.org)



DiscoverBOATING

| [discoverboating.com](http://discoverboating.com)



Personal Flotation Device  
Manufacturers Association



## **Life jacket, life vest, Personal Flotation Device (PFD)—whatever you call it, *it only works if you wear it!***

### **Boat smart—Wear your life jacket**

Most drownings occur way out at sea, right? Wrong! Nine out of ten drownings occur in inland waters, most within a few feet of safety and involving boats under 20-feet long. Most drowning victims had a life jacket available and chose not to wear it.

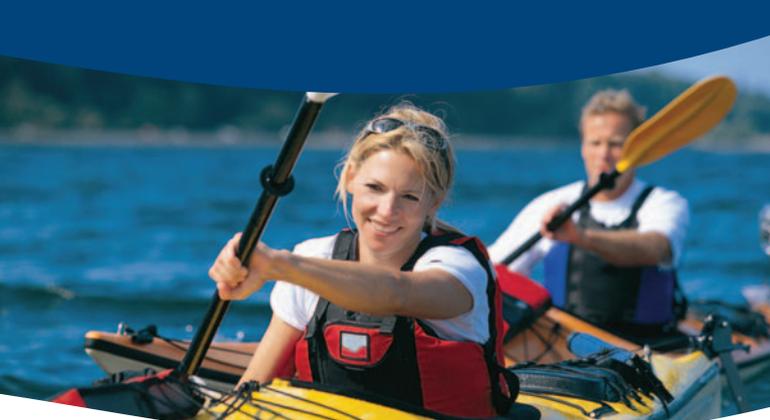
Boaters think they will have time to prepare for an accident. Time to grab a life jacket and put it on. In reality, there often is no time. And once you're in the water, it may be too late.

Life jackets are designed to keep you afloat in the water and give you extra time. Time for rescue services to reach you. Time that can mean the difference between life and death, because it doesn't take long to drown. In fact, it only takes 60 seconds for an adult to drown, and 20 seconds for a child to drown.

If you haven't been wearing your life jacket because of the way it makes you look or feel, there's good news. Life jacket technology has come a long way—the bulky, ugly, old orange life jacket is a thing of the past. Manufacturers are listening to consumers, refining fit and size options. Radical changes in life jacket design—extra large armholes, shaped fit, flexible panels, pockets, inflatables and more comfortable materials—make today's life jackets easy to wear.

Before you shove off, make sure everyone on board is wearing a life jacket with all straps, zippers and ties fastened. Tuck in any loose strap ends to avoid getting hung-up.

**70%** of all boating fatality accidents result from drowning. Almost 85% of those who drown are not wearing a life jacket!  
**Having life jackets aboard does not save lives—WEARING them does!**



## How many life jackets do you need?

The United States Coast Guard requires USCG-approved life jackets on all recreational boats. The number and type depend on the number of passengers, the size and type of your boat, and your boating activities.

YOU MUST HAVE one of the following wearable life jackets for each person on board:

- Off-Shore life jacket (Type I PFD)
- Near-Shore Buoyant Vest (Type II PFD)
- Flotation Aid (Type III PFD)
- Wearable Special Use Device (Type V PFD)

Federal regulations require all children 13 years old and younger to wear a life jacket unless they are below deck or in an enclosed cabin. State laws vary in terms of age; be sure to check with your state's boating safety office.

Boats 16 feet or longer (excluding canoes and kayaks) must also have at least one throwable flotation device (Type IV) e.g., cushions, ring buoys.

For example: If four people are on your 16-foot boat, you must have four wearable life jackets and one throwable flotation device immediately available.

**Nine out of ten drownings occur in inland waters, most within a few feet of safety and involve boats under 20-ft. long.**

### More Buoyancy Means More Lift

Type of Life Jacket (Adult)	Minimum Adult Inherent Buoyancy (Pounds)	Minimum Inflatable Buoyancy (Pounds)
I	22	34
II	15.5	34
III	15.5	22.5
IV Boat cushion, Ring buoy	18/16.5	—
I Hybrid	15.5 (deflated)	32 (fully inflated)
II & III Hybrid	10 (deflated)	22 (fully inflated)
V Hybrid	7.5 (deflated)	22 (fully inflated)
V Special Use Device	15.5 to 22	22.5 to 34

**Inherently buoyant**—a foam vest that floats on its own. Offers buoyancy without the need for inflation.

**Inflatable**—features chamber that is inflated by CO<sub>2</sub> mechanism when buoyancy is needed. Manual and automatic options available.

**Hybrid**—features an inflatable chamber and buoyant foam material.



## Choosing a life jacket

Today's life jackets offer comfort, style and flexibility, with a wide range of models, sizes and colors available. You can find life jackets tailor-made for specific activities like paddlesports, water sports, angling/hunting, recreational boating and sailing. There are four basic life jacket types, but not all life jackets are suitable for all activities. Choose your life jacket based on your planned activities and anticipated water conditions. Always look for the United States Coast Guard approval number before you purchase any life jacket. Above all, remember, **the best life jacket is one you will wear.**

Most adults need only an extra 7–12 pounds of buoyancy to keep their heads above water. A life jacket can give you that “extra lift” until help comes. Keep in mind the fact that life jackets are not “one-size-fits-all” garments. How much “extra lift” you need in the water is determined by body weight and fat, lung size, clothing and water conditions (rough or calm). In general, the more physically fit you are, the more “lift” you need. Check your life jacket label to be sure it's made for your weight and size. In the event of an emergency— **DON'T PANIC!** Relax, put your head back and let your life jacket help you come out on top.



Hybrid



Inherently Buoyant



Inflatable



Type I



Type 1



Type I

## Off-shore life jacket

### (TYPE I PFD)

Best for open, rough or remote waters, where rescue may not be immediate.

### Benefits

- Provides most reliable flotation
- Turns most unconscious wearers face-up
- Comes in highly visible colors
- May have reflective material for search and rescue

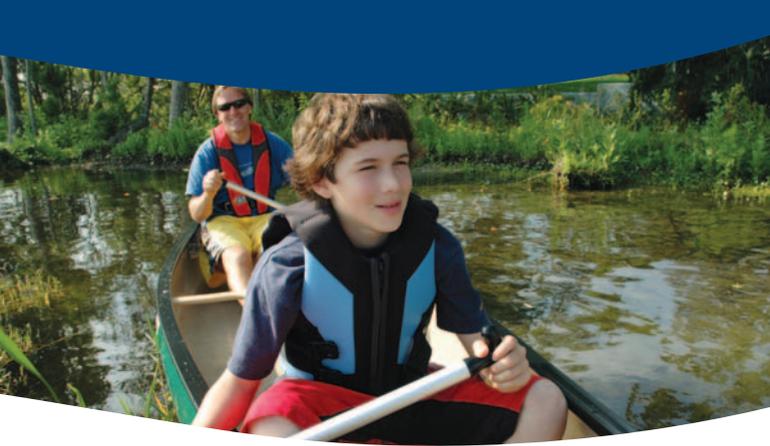
### Considerations

**Inherently buoyant**—may be bulky in and out of water

**Hybrid**—needs regular inspection and rearming

**Inflatable**—SOLAS (Safety Of Life At Sea) devices have two separate chambers that must inflate automatically when submerged and indicate when CO<sub>2</sub> chamber is empty

- Requires regular inspection and rearming
- Not suitable for nonswimmers
- Not suitable for activities with frequent water entry



## Near-shore buoyant vest (Type II PFD)

Good for calm or inland water, where fast rescue is likely. Be sure to water-test before boating activity.

### Benefits

- Turns some unconscious wearers face-up in the water
- Less bulky and more comfortable than foam Off-shore life jacket (Type I PFD)
- Approved for multiple sizes from infant through adult
- Good choice for children
- Inflatables deploy automatically when submerged and may be suitable for some rough-water conditions



Type II

### Considerations

#### Inherently buoyant

- Not recommended for long hours on rough water
- Bulky for adults to wear

#### Hybrid

- Needs regular inspection and rearming to be reliable

#### Inflatable

- Requires regular inspection and rearming to be reliable
- Not suitable for nonswimmers
- Not suitable for activities with frequent water entry
- Approved for adult wearers only

### Differences for Inflatables

- Type II inflatables and hybrids turn more wearers face-up
- Type II inflatables and hybrids have slightly more visible color when inflated
- Type II inflatables and hybrids suitable for many rough water uses

## Flotation aid (TYPE III PFD)

Good for conscious users in calm inland water or where fast rescue is likely.

### Benefits

- Generally the most comfortable for continuous wear
- Designed for general boating & designated activities marked on the device
- Available in many styles, including vests and flotation coats



### Considerations

#### Inherently buoyant

- Wearer may have to tilt head back to avoid being submerged face-down
- Not recommended for extended survival in rough water; wearer's face may often be covered by waves
- Must be water-tested by nonswimmers before boating



Type III

#### Hybrid

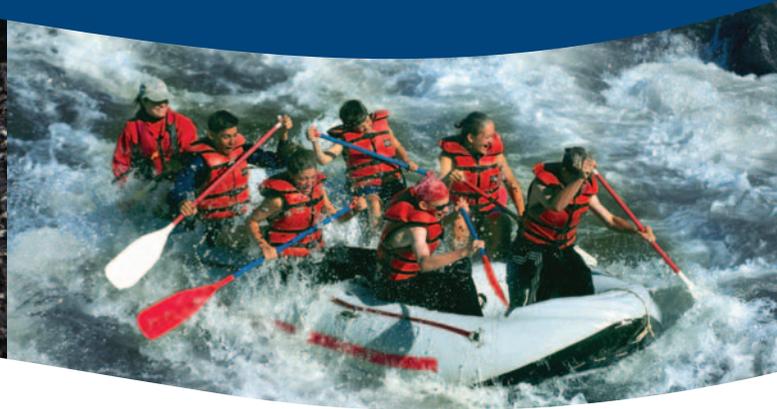
- Needs regular inspection and rearming to be reliable

#### Inflatable

- Requires regular inspection and rearming to be reliable
- Not suitable for nonswimmers
- Not suitable for activities with frequent water entry
- Not reliable for long hours in rough water
- Approved for adult wearers only

### Differences for Inflatables

- Type III inflatables keep most unconscious wearers face-up after inflation



## Throwable device (TYPE IV PFD)

Includes buoys and boat cushions. They function as throwable devices and are not designed to be worn.

### Use

- May be thrown from craft or land
- Provide back-up to wearable life jackets
- Some styles may be used as seat cushions

### Styles

- Cushions, rings and horseshoe buoys

### Cushion Use

- Place both arms through the loops and hold tightly to your chest
- Practice throwing your Type IV device.
- Cushions throw best underhand



Boat Cushion



Ring Buoy

## Special use devices (TYPE V PFD)

Type V varieties include boardsailing vests, deck suits, pullover vests, work vests, some hybrid life jackets, inflatable life jackets with OCR harness and others. They are only appropriate for specific uses or conditions. Some Type V life jackets meet the U.S. Coast Guard's Carriage Regulations only if worn in accordance with the label.

### Benefits

- Designed for specific activities—check label for limits of use
- Continuous wear prevents users from being caught without protection—most accidents occur suddenly

### Considerations

- Must be used in accordance with label directions for maximum effectiveness

### Inherently buoyant and some Hybrids

- May be better suited for cool climates and seasons

### Inflatable

- May require more than one step to function effectively
- Only approved for persons 16 years of age and older



Type V  
Work Vest



Type V  
Immersion Suit



## Inflatable life jackets

Inflatable life jackets rely on inflatable chambers that provide buoyancy when inflated. Uninflated, inflatable life jackets are less bulky than inherently buoyant life jackets. Inflatables come in a variety of U.S. Coast Guard-defined performance types. The specific type of life jacket is determined by characteristics such as its amount of buoyancy, its in-water performance and its type of inflation mechanism. To understand the details of a life jacket, read the life jacket label and owner's manual, and consult your dealer or retailer if necessary.

All Inflatables contain a backup oral inflation tube (which also serves as the deflation tube)

### Benefits

- High visibility when inflated
- Turns most wearers face-up faster than traditional life jackets
- Will usually keep unconscious users face-up
- May be more comfortable than inherently buoyant life jackets
- Superior in-water performance

### Considerations

- Some require multiple steps to deploy
- Not suitable for nonswimmers because they cannot accomplish oral inflation if needed
- Only approved for persons 16 years of age and older
- Not appropriate for activities that involve frequent water entry or high-speed boating activities (e.g., personal watercraft use, racing, sailboarding, whitewater rafting)
- Require frequent inspection and maintenance

## Types of inflatable mechanisms

### Automatic:

Uses a water-soluble capsule attached to the inflation unit; its mechanism pierces the CO<sub>2</sub> cylinder and releases the gas when submerged or when it senses other water-related triggers (e.g. water pressure). Units with automatic inflation mechanisms may also be manually inflated by using the ripcord.

### Manual:

Releases the CO<sub>2</sub> gas from the cylinder via ripcord

### Cylinder Seal Indication:

Makes it easier to determine if the CO<sub>2</sub> cylinder is properly armed. Life jackets with cylinder seal indication are considered more reliable.

The CO<sub>2</sub> cylinders in life jackets without cylinder seal indication must be inspected regularly to determine if they are charged.



Belt Pack Inflatable



Regular Inflatable



## Trying your life jacket

Try on your life jacket to see if it fits snugly. Then test it in shallow water to see how it performs.

To check your life jacket's buoyancy, relax your body and tilt your head back. Make sure your life jacket keeps your chin above water and you can breathe easily.

Be aware that your life jacket may not act the same in swift or rough water as in calm water. Clothing and items in your pockets may also affect how your life jacket works.

If your mouth is not well above the water, you need a life jacket with more buoyancy. Older foam life jackets may lose buoyancy and may have to be replaced.

Life jackets should not ride up on the body in the water. If a wearer's stomach is larger than the chest, however, ride-up may occur.

Before use, test your life jacket to be sure that excessive ride-up does not impair its performance.

**It only takes  
60 seconds for  
an adult to drown, and  
20 seconds for a child  
to drown.**

## Caring for your life jacket

Follow these tips to keep your life jacket in good condition:

1. Don't alter your life jacket. If yours doesn't fit, get one that does. An altered life jacket is no longer U.S. Coast Guard-approved and may not save your life.
2. Don't put heavy objects on your life jacket or use it for a kneeling pad or boat fender. Life jackets lose buoyancy when crushed.
3. Let your life jacket drip dry thoroughly before putting it away. Always stow it in a well-ventilated place.
4. Don't leave your life jacket on board for long periods when the boat is not in use.
5. Never dry your life jacket on a radiator, heater or any other direct heat source.
6. Put your name on your life jacket if you're the only one who wears it.

**Most drowning victims  
had a life jacket  
available and chose  
not to wear it.**



## Checking your life jacket

Test each life jacket at the start of the season. The law says your life jackets must be in good shape before you use your boat. Cut up and throw away any life jackets in poor shape.

Check your life jacket often for rips, tears and holes and ensure that seams, fabric straps and hardware are okay. Give the belts and tie tapes a quick, hard pull to make sure they are secure. You should find no signs of waterlogging, mildew odor or shrinkage of the buoyant materials.

Fading material could indicate loss of strength. A weathered life jacket might tear more easily, and lose flotation material. Store your life jacket in a dry, cool, dark place. If the color of your life jacket is fading, check its strength or replace it.

## Maintaining inflatable life jackets

Check your inflatable life jacket—including the buoyancy cell and inflation system—at least every 2 months, in addition to the following:

1. If the life jacket does not have cylinder seal indication, remove the cylinder, and check for punctures and rust.
2. Check all components for dirt or corrosion.
3. Check the mouth inflation valve for blockages and tears.
4. Store in a cool dry place.
5. Replace the bobbin on an automatic model every 12 months, unless specified otherwise.

## Teach your children well

The U.S. Coast Guard and life jacket manufacturers recommend immediate in-water testing of children's life jackets on the intended user. Children often panic when they fall into the water. While a life jacket will keep a child afloat, it may not keep a struggling child face-up. Violent movement can counteract a life jacket's performance; therefore, it is important to teach children how to wear a life jacket and how to relax their arms and legs in the water.

Check your child's life jacket for proper fit. To work correctly, a life jacket must fit snugly. To check fit, pick the child up by the shoulders of the life jacket. If the life jacket fits, the child's chin and ears will not slip through. Check the life jacket label to ensure it matches your child's weight.

Life jackets are not babysitters. Even if a child wears a life jacket when on or near the water, an adult must always be present. Never use inflatable toys or rafts in place of life jackets.

While some children weighing between 30 and 50 pounds may like the freedom of movement that a Flotation Aid (Type III PFD) provides, most children in this weight range, especially those who can't swim, should wear a Type II life jacket; off-shore they should wear a Type I life jacket.

Although life jackets are made in infant sizes, it is not recommended to bring small infants on board. Babies don't enjoy wearing life jackets. If you must bring your infant along, talk to your local retailer or dealer to help you determine the best life jacket.



## The cold facts

Cold water (less than 70° F) can lower your body temperature, causing hypothermia. If your body temperature drops too low, you may pass out and then drown. The human body cools 25 times faster in cold water than in air.

Water temperature, body size, body fat percentage and movement in the water each play a part in cold-water survival. Small people cool faster than large people; children cool faster than adults.

Life jackets can help you survive cold water. They let you float without using energy and some insulate your body from cold water. A snug-fitting life jacket is better than a loose-fitting one. When you boat in cold water, use a flotation coat or deck suit-style life jacket. In cold water, they're better than vests because they cover more of your body.

**How Hypothermia Affects Most Adults**

Water Temperature (Degrees Fahrenheit)	Exhaustion or Unconsciousness	Expected Time of Survival
32.5	Under 15 min.	Under 15 to 45 min.
32.5 to 40	15 to 30 min.	30 to 90 min.
40 to 50	30 to 60 min.	1 to 3 hrs.
50 to 60	1 to 2 hrs.	1 to 6 hrs.
60 to 70	2 to 7 hrs.	2 to 40 hrs.
70 to 80	2 to 12 hrs.	3 hrs. to indefinite
Over 80	Indefinite	Indefinite

## Cold-water survival

Maintaining body temperature is crucial to cold-water survival. When you're in cold water, do not swim unless you can reach a nearby boat, fellow survivor or floating object. Movement lowers body temperature—even good swimmers drown while swimming in cold water.

If a nearby floating object is large, pull as much of your body as possible out of the water and onto the float. The more your body remains out of water, the less heat it will lose. Do not use survival flotation methods that involve submerging your face in cold water. Keeping your head above water will conserve heat and increase survival time.

Floating in the **H**eat **E**scape **L**essening **P**osition, or HELP, will lessen heat loss. The HELP position consists of bringing your knees up as close as possible to your chest and grasping your hands together over your knees and chest, but under the front of your life jacket. If you're wearing a Type III life jacket, or if the HELP position causes your face to become submerged, bring your legs and arms straight down and hold your arms tight to your sides while keeping your head tilted back. Whenever possible, keep arms snug to the body under the life jacket. This is called the SURVIVAL position.

If others are in the water with you, HUDDLE together for warmth. Keep a positive outlook—it will increase your survival chances. Always wear your life jacket. Even if you become helpless from hypothermia, your life jacket will help keep you afloat.



## Inherently Buoyant, Inflatable or Hybrid. Which is right for you?

Inherently Buoyant (foam)	
<b>Use</b> For swimmers and nonswimmers. Adult and child sizes.	<b>Advantages</b> Rugged; low maintenance
Inflatables (CO <sub>2</sub> cartridges)	
<b>Use</b> For swimmers only. Adult sizes only. Requires regular user checks. Not for use in personal watercraft or sports such as waterskiing.  <small>See pages 12–13 for full information about inflatables.</small>	<b>Advantages</b> Best comfort in warm weather; high performance in compact size and maintenance
Hybrid (combines inherently buoyant material with an inflatable bladder)	
<b>Use</b> For swimmers and nonswimmers. Adult and child sizes. Requires regular maintenance.  <small>See pages 5–13 for descriptions of wearable life jacket types.</small>	<b>Advantages</b> Best comfort for nonswimmers; stylish, high performance

## Which life jacket type is right for you?

Type I	
<b>Use</b> Off-shore Open or rough waters Coastal cruising	<b>Advantages</b> Floats the best, although bulky to wear. Will turn most unconscious wearers face-up; highly visible coloring.
Type II	
Inherently Buoyant Types	
<b>Use</b> Inland waters or calm waters where fast rescue is likely	<b>Advantages</b> Comfortable; will turn some unconscious wearers face-up. Great option for children.
Type III	
<b>Use</b> Inland waters or calm waters where fast rescue is likely	<b>Advantages</b> Very versatile & comfortable. Extensive & diverse assortment of styles available.
Inflatable Types	
<b>Use</b> Many are suitable for open or rough waters, as well as calm and inland waters.	<b>Advantages</b> Will turn most unconscious wearers face-up. Not bulky, comfortable to wear.
Hybrid (combines inherently buoyant material with an inflatable bladder)	
<b>Use</b> Inland waters or calm waters where fast rescue is likely	<b>Advantages</b> Comfortable; will turn some unconscious wearers face-up.



## Boating safety is everyone's responsibility

In addition to understanding life jacket facts, you should take a boating course. Knowing the rules of boating is one of the best ways to avoid danger. You should also know how to handle the craft you're operating in multiple environments—being prepared will help determine safety procedures.

For further details, contact your local Coast Guard Auxiliary, Power Squadrons or National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) office.

If you plan to be a passenger, learn emergency safety procedures. Above all, know your capabilities as a boater and a swimmer. A little planning before boating can prevent disasters later.

**It's only a  
"life" jacket  
if you wear it!**

## Safe boating is no accident! Keep this pamphlet in a convenient spot. Read it often.

If you need more information about life jackets and safe boating, contact your local safe boating authority or one of the following:

### **BoatU.S. Foundation**

800.336.2628 • [boatus.com/foundation](http://boatus.com/foundation)

### **National Association of State Boating Law Administrators**

859.225.9487 • [nasbla.org](http://nasbla.org)

### **National Safe Boating Council**

703.361.4294 • [safeboatingcouncil.org](http://safeboatingcouncil.org)

### **Underwriters Laboratories Inc.**

877.854.3577 • [ul.com](http://ul.com)

### **U.S. Coast Guard Boating Safety Infoline**

[uscgboating.org/safety/safety.htm](http://uscgboating.org/safety/safety.htm)

[uscgboating.org](http://uscgboating.org) • [uscg.mil/hq/g-m/mse4/pfd.htm](http://uscg.mil/hq/g-m/mse4/pfd.htm)

### **U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary**

877.875.6296 • [cgaux.org](http://cgaux.org)

### **U.S. Power Squadrons**

888.367.8777 • [usps.org](http://usps.org)

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Personal Flotation Device Manufacturers Association  
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200 E. Randolph Dr., Suite 5100, Chicago, IL 60601-6528  
Tel: 312.946.6280 • 312.946.6200 • Fax: 312.946.0388  
[pfdma.org](http://pfdma.org) • [nmma.org](http://nmma.org) • [discoverboating.com](http://discoverboating.com)