

PFD Selection & Use

Source: *A Boater's Guide to the Federal Requirements for Recreational Boats*
U.S. Coast Guard Boating Safety Division

Life Jackets / PFDs

All recreational vessels must carry one (1) wearable life jacket / PFD for each person on board. Any boat 16 ft. or longer (except canoes and kayaks) must also carry one (1) throwable (Type IV) device. Always check the manufacturer's information booklet on label(s) provided with all life jackets. The booklets provide essential information including size, type, intended use and U.S. Coast Guard approval information.

Life jackets must be:

- U.S. Coast Guard approved (check label for USCG approval number)
- In good and serviceable condition (life jacket will not show deterioration that could diminish its performance such as broken or corroded hardware, detached webbing or a non-functioning oral inflation tube)
- Appropriate size and type for each intended user on board
- Properly stowed on board

U.S. Coast Guard-approved **Inflatable PFDs / Life Jackets** are authorized for use by persons 16 years of age or older (check label). Inflatable life jackets are compact and more comfortable, encouraging regular use. They are not recommended for use by weak or non-swimmers unless worn inflated.

Unless worn, inflatable life jackets must be properly armed with a full CO2 cylinder, an inflator system status indicator with clear window, and an accessible manual-inflation cord. All inflatable PFDs are equipped with a backup oral inflation tube (which also serves as a means of deflating the life jacket).

The inflation system of an inflatable PFD need not be armed when the PFD is worn inflated. Some items that are not required but are a good idea to have packed with your life jacket include a whistle and an emergency light.

Recreational Boating PFD Selection

Type I PFDs / Off-Shore Life Jackets: Provide the most buoyancy. Best for all waters, especially open ocean, rough seas, or remote waters where rescue may be slow coming. Abandon-ship life jacket for commercial vessels and all vessels carrying passengers for hire. Designed to turn an unconscious wearer to a face-up position in the water.

- Inherently Buoyant Type I PFDs - SOLAS Service
- Inherently Buoyant Type I PFDs - U.S. Service
- Inflatable Type I PFDs - SOLAS and Domestic
- Hybrid Type I PFDs - US Services

Type II PFDS / Near-Shore Buoyancy Vests: For general boating activities in calm, inland waters, or where there is a good chance for fast rescue. This type of inflatable turns as well as a Type I foam jacket.

- Inherently Buoyant Type II PFDS
- Inflatable Type II PFDS
- Hybrid Type II PFDS

Type III PFDS / Flotation Aids: For general boating or the specialized activity clearly marked on the device such as water skiing, hunting, fishing, canoeing or kayaking. Good for calm, inland waters, or where there is a good chance for fast rescue. Wearer may have to tilt their head back to remain in a face-up position in the water. Available in many styles, colors and sizes, and generally the most comfortable type for continuous wear. This type of inflatable turns as well as a Type II foam vest.

- Inherently Buoyant Type III PFDS
- Inflatable Type III PFDS
- Hybrid Type III PFDS

Type V PFDS / Special-Use Devices: Intended for specific activities and may be carried instead of another life jacket only if used according to the condition(s) for which it is approved (as shown on its label). A Type V provides the performance of a Type I, II or III (as marked on its label). If the label says the life jacket is “approved only when worn,” the life jacket **must be worn** (except by persons in enclosed spaces) and used in accordance with the approval label to meet carriage requirements. See label for limits of use.

- Hybrid Inflatable PFDS
- Canoe/Kayak Vest
- Boardsailing Vests
- Deck Suits
- Work Vests for Commercial Vessels
- Commercial Whitewater Vests
- Man-Overboard Rescue Devices
- Law Enforcement Flotation Devices

Inflatable PFD with Safety Harness: Approved only as a Type V Special-Use Device because its use to prevent falls overboard presents significant potential risks. The U.S. Coast Guard has not assessed its potential for injury from suddenly stopping a fall and, in case of capsizing or sinking, the boat may take the wearer down, resulting in death. *Do not* attach the harness to the boat unless it is being worn with a tether of less than 6.5 ft. in length with quick-release-under-load hardware. *Be sure to read the safety harness section of the owner’s manual for intended use.*

- Inherently Buoyant Type III PFDS
- Inflatable Type III PFDS
- Hybrid Type III PFDS

Each PFD sold for use on a recreational boat is required to be provided with a guide to selection entitled “Think Safe – Choose the Right PFD.” These pamphlets are tailored to the kind of PFD to which they are attached.

Commercial PFD Selection

Type I PFDS / Off-Shore Life Jackets: Best for all waters, open ocean, rough seas, or remote water, where rescue may be slow coming. Abandon-ship lifejacket for commercial vessels and all vessels carrying passengers for hire:

- Inherently Buoyant Type I PFDS - SOLAS Service
- Inherently Buoyant Type I PFDS - U.S. Service
- Inflatable Type I PFDS - SOLAS and Domestic
- Hybrid Type I PFDS - US Services

Buoyancy

Most adults only need an extra seven to twelve pounds of buoyancy to keep their heads above water. A PFD can give that "extra lift," and it's made to keep you floating until help comes. But a PFD is a personal flotation device and it's important to get the right one for you.

Type PFDS	Minimum Adult Buoyancy in Pounds (Newtons)
I - Inflatable	33.0 (150)
I - Buoyant Foam or Kapok	22.0 (100)
II - Inflatable	33.0 (150)
II - Buoyant Foam or Kapok	15.5 (70)
III - Inflatable	22.0 (100)
III - Buoyant Foam	15.5 (70)
IV - Ring Buoys	16.5 (75)
IV - Boat Cushions	18.0 (82)
V - Hybrid Inflatables	22.0 (Fully inflated) (100) 7.5 (Deflated) (34)
V - Special Use Device - Inflatable	22.0 to 34.0 (100 to 155)
V - Special Use Device - Buoyant Foam	

Frequently Asked Questions About PFDs

"I only need a PFD in case I'm unconscious or incapacitated, right?"

Wrong. You need your PFD before you're unconscious, otherwise, how would you put it on? Once you understand the importance of wearing a PFD, you're prepared to consider the best design for you. There are many good choices to keep you and your loved ones safe on the water. Some of the choices are a better for certain situations than others, and therefore the choices are explained in the "Think Safe" PFD pamphlet that is sold with every US Coast Guard approved PFD.

Obviously, the best PFD is the one that saves your life every time it's needed. To accomplish that task, a PFD must be available for proper use at the time of an accident, must be designed to perform well enough to keep your head out of the water, and must be reliable enough to provide its design performance when needed. It is the combination of these three characteristics that define the life-saving potential, or safety, of your PFD. If a PFD fails to do any one of these three essential tasks, it can't save your life.

The perfect life preserver, lifejacket, or PFD has not yet been designed. All the designs in existence today have some limitations. For example, Type I PFDs (off-shore lifejackets) have the highest buoyancy of the inherently buoyant Types, but they are not considered comfortable enough to be worn continuously. Therefore, they are frequently not being used when accidents occur, and many boaters have died that could have been saved with just part of the buoyancy in this kind of PFD. Another example is the inflatable Type III PFDs. These recently approved PFDs provide the buoyancy of a Type I PFD and are comfortable to wear, but they lack the reliability and low maintenance characteristics, and cost, of inherently buoyant PFDs. Because each style has limitations, users are given a choice of PFDs to match to their particular boating activities. The Coast Guard requires the "Think Safe" pamphlet to be attached to each PFD sold in order to give boaters the information needed to make a good choice.

What's the "Best" PFD?

In terms of risk of drowning, the safest Personal Flotation Device (PFD) is the one you're willing to wear!