

## WHAT IS A PERSONAL FLOTATION DEVICE?

A personal flotation device (PFD) is a life jacket, life preserver, or life vest. Whatever you call it, it can save your life—**if you wear it!** A life jacket is designed to hold your head above water so you can breathe. In either case, **“It won’t work if you don’t wear it!”** The decision **NOT** to wear a life jacket may be the worst, and last, decision you ever make.

## KNOW THE LAW ABOUT PFDs

- All boats must have a U.S. Coast Guard approved wearable (Type I, II, III, or V) PFD on board for each person.

- In addition to wearable PFDs, boats 16 feet and over must have a throwable device (Type IV) on board. Canoes and kayaks, regardless of length, are not required to carry a throwable device. A throwable device cannot be used as a substitute for a wearable device.

- Type V life jackets must be used according to the requirements on their labels.

All life jackets must be in good and serviceable condition (no rips in the material, no belts or buckles missing, etc.), and the label’s U.S. Coast Guard approval number must be legible.

- Wearable life jackets must be “readily accessible” (easily reached and ready to wear), and the right size for the person wearing it.

**Tip:** Try swimming in your life jacket in a warm-water setting. This lets you adjust it for a proper fit and helps you decide if it’s really the right one for you. This also helps prepare you for an actual emergency.

- Type IV throwable devices are not designed to be worn. They are thrown to a victim in the water who grasps it. They must be “immediately available” (within arm’s reach) to the operator and all passengers.

## WHO HAS TO WEAR A PFD?

- **All children 12 years of age and younger** on all Commonwealth waters must wear a life jacket while underway on any boat 20 feet in length or less and on all canoes and kayaks. “Underway” includes drifting boats.

- **Anyone towed behind a boat**, no matter what the activity and regardless of age, must wear a life jacket.

- **All personal watercraft operators and passengers.**

- **All sailboarders** (windsurfers).

- **Everyone** (regardless of age) boating on **U.S. Army Corp of Engineers Pittsburgh District** lakes, in boats less than 16 feet in length and on all canoes and kayaks.

**Safety Note:** A Type III life jacket with an impact rating of 50 m.p.h. or more is recommended as the safest and most comfortable type to wear in high-speed boating activities. Other bulkier, less streamlined types of life jackets are not designed for high-speed boating activities and could even cause bodily harm.

## INFLATABLE LIFE JACKETS

There are two types. Both types use a small carbon dioxide cylinder to inflate an air bladder. Both types have a backup oral inflation tube, better buoyancy than standard PFDs, and the ability to turn an unconscious person face-up in the water. Available varieties include “suspender” types, fishing vests, belt pack vests, and even float coats and deck suits.

1. **Manually activated**—requires the user to pull a “rip cord” mechanism to puncture the CO<sup>2</sup> cartridge, allowing it to inflate. These are classified as Type III devices and meet or exceed the same standards as any other non-inflatable Type III.

2. **Automatically activated**—inflates when a water-soluble material dissolves and releases a spring-trigger plunger, which punctures the CO<sup>2</sup> cartridge, allowing it to inflate. These are classified as Type V devices and **MUST BE WORN** at all times, or you must keep another standard-type wearable device on board to comply with the life jacket laws.

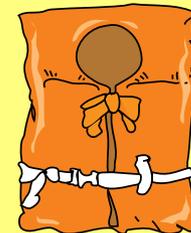
Inflatable life jackets are cooler to wear and less bulky than traditional models, but are also more easily damaged. Frequently check for a faulty or inaccessible inflation mechanism, functional CO<sup>2</sup> cartridge, tears, broken buckles and missing straps. **They are NOT approved for anyone towed behind a boat, on board a personal watercraft (Jet Ski®, Waverunner®, Sea-Doo®, etc.), or on board a sailboard (wind surfer).**

## TYPES OF PERSONAL FLOTATION DEVICES



### Type I

**Off-Shore Life Jacket.** Designed to turn an unconscious person in the water to a vertical or slightly backward position, they have over 20 pounds of buoyancy. These are the best PFDs to keep you afloat in large and rough waters where rescue may be slow in coming. They are most commonly found on commercial crafts.



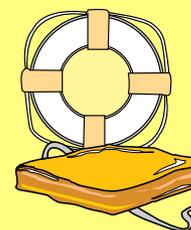
### Type II

**Near-Shore Buoyant Vest.** Also designed to turn an unconscious person to a vertical or slightly backward position, they are less bulky than a Type I. They have a minimum buoyancy of 15.5 pounds and are for calm, inland water where there is a chance of a fast rescue.



### Type III

**Flotation Aid.** These are generally considered the most comfortable PFDs. There are many sizes and styles for different boating activities. Except for the Type III inflatable life jacket, most are not designed to turn an unconscious person face-up and have a minimum buoyancy of 15.5 pounds.



### Type IV

**Throwable Device.** These are designed to be thrown to someone in the water. They include boat cushions ring and horseshoe buoys. Do not wear them on the back; they are designed to be grasped to the chest, **not worn**. Keep these immediately available for emergencies.



### Type V

**Special-Use Device.** These are wearable devices approved only for certain activities. The label shows its approved uses and limitations. Varieties include work vests, board sailing vests, and white water vests.

## WHAT KIND OF LIFE JACKET SHOULD I BUY?

Consider several factors before you buy:

- Is it comfortable? Try it on. It should fit snugly but not too tightly.

- Can you swim or float comfortably in it?

- Is it adjustable? Different weather and temperature conditions require wearing different amounts of clothing. Your life jacket should be adjustable accordingly.

- Where will you be boating? If you will be on big lakes, at sea, or on white water, choose a life jacket with a higher amount of flotation (buoyancy). If you plan to boat only on calm, inland waters, choose one that will be comfortable to wear all day.

No matter what your boating activity will be, a life jacket does not have to be expensive to be effective. Several life jacket manufacturers show their products on their web sites. You can link to these manufacturers' sites from the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's web site at [www.fish.state.pa.us](http://www.fish.state.pa.us). Just click on "Boating," and then click on "PFD Information."



## CARE OF YOUR PFD

- Air dry all wet life jackets before storing.

- Avoid storing life jackets in plastic. Plastic holds moisture that eventually deteriorates the material and thread.

- Check for mildew, leaks or other damage like torn straps or broken zippers. Destroy and replace all damaged units.

- Avoid using life jackets as boat fenders or laying heavy items on them that can crush them.

- Prevent life jackets from contacting oil or grease. This deteriorates the material.



## CAUTIONS

- A life jacket should not be considered a substitute for good swimming ability. Although PFDs are an effective aid to buoyancy, swimming skills are still the basic ingredient in water safety.



- Cold water kills. Few people realize the danger involved in a sudden plunge into cold water. Cold water numbs the extremities and limits the reflexes. Life expectancy is greatly shortened in water that's less than 70 degrees. If you find yourself in cold water, you may not have the opportunity or ability to put on a PFD—the device should always be worn when boating on cold water.

- Remember that 85 percent of all boating deaths could have been prevented if the victims had been wearing a life jacket.

## BOATING SAFETY IS EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY!

Know before you go! Knowing about PFDs is just one part of the boating picture. There are other important facts you must understand.



Take a safe boating course. Know and understand all boating laws. Know your capabilities and limits as a boater and a swimmer. Know how to operate your boat. Know the water on which you will be boating. If you are a passenger, learn what to do in an emergency.

To find a classroom boating course near you, or to take the Boat Pennsylvania Internet or Correspondence courses, check one of the following resources:

Commission web site:

[www.fish.state.pa.us](http://www.fish.state.pa.us)

Commission Boating Course Hotline:

1-888-723-4741



# PERSONAL FLOTATION DEVICES

## LIFE JACKETS LIFE VESTS LIFE PRESERVERS



Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission

Bureau of Boating & Education

[www.fish.state.pa.us](http://www.fish.state.pa.us)