

FACT SHEET: Life jackets

Life jackets are the single most effective piece of safety gear in a boat. Study after study show that if people wear their life jacket, they are more likely to survive if something goes wrong.

State law requires all boats—including canoes, kayaks and stand up paddle boards—to have at least one properly fitted, serviceable, U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket (also known as personal flotation device or PFD) for each person on the boat. In addition, the following requirements apply:

- One Coast Guard-approved, **Type IV** (throwable) flotation device must on board vessels 16 feet or longer. Canoes and kayaks are exempt from this requirement.
- Children under 13 years of age **must wear** a Coast Guard-approved life jacket at all times when underway in a boat less than 19 feet in length, unless in a fully enclosed area.
- Each person on board a personal watercraft (PWC or jet ski) and anyone being towed behind a boat must wear a Coast Guard-approved life jacket.
- Local police and sheriff's departments or home owner's associations may have additional ordinances.



Key considerations: Is it the right life jacket for the right activity? And does it fit just right?

What the data show

One half of recreational boating fatalities happen on calm water. Nine out of 10 drownings happen on inland waters and a few hundred feet from shore. In many incidences, life jackets were on board but were not worn.

Nationally

- In 2016, where cause of death was known, 80 percent of fatal boating accident victims drowned. Of those drowning victims—when life jacket use was reported—83 percent were not wearing a life jacket.
- Eight out of every 10 boaters who drowned were in boats less than 21 feet in length.
- The Coast Guard estimates 80 percent of boating fatalities could have been prevented if boaters wore their life jackets. (<http://coastguard.dodlive.mil/2012/05/12-tips-for-12-weeks-of-summer/>).

Source: 2016 Recreational Boating Statistics, published by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard and Office of Auxiliary and Boating Safety.



Washington state

- From 2013 to 2017, where the cause of death was known, 85 percent of fatal boating accident victims drowned. Of those drowning victims—when life jacket use was reported—70 percent were not wearing a life jacket.
- From 2012 to 2017, half of the boating fatalities were in paddlecraft.
- In 2017, 66 percent of fatal boating accidents involved boats less than 21 feet long, more than half of those were paddlecraft.
- From 2012 to 2017, 68 percent of boating fatalities happen on inland waters (38 percent on lakes and 30 percent on rivers).

Source: Washington State Parks Boating Program Recreational Boating Accident Report data.

State Parks Boating Program recommends...

Anyone can drown regardless of age and swimming capabilities. A life jacket only works if people wear it.

Many people assume merely having life jackets onboard is sufficient. However, accidents happen rapidly and without warning. Usually, there is not enough time to grab a life jacket, so they should always be worn. Today's life jackets are designed to be more comfortable. We encourage boaters to shop around and find a comfortable life jacket they will actually wear. Although the state only requires children to wear a life jacket, adults are encouraged to wear one, especially on boats less than 21 feet long, which are at a higher risk of capsizing. Adults set a good example for children by wearing life jackets.

The Boating Program also encourages boaters to learn, understand and know the following about wearing life jackets.

- Learn how to properly fit a life jacket: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iNjvx62zI>.
- Understand which type of life jacket is most appropriate for the location and boating activity: https://www.uscgboating.org/images/howtochoosetherightlifejacket_brochure.pdf.
- Know the federal and state laws as well as local ordinances: www.wearitwashington.org.
- Know where to find an extra life jacket at various free loaner stations throughout the state: www.lifejacketloaner.org.
- Learn about the national WearIt campaign, and pledge to always wear a life jacket while on the water: <http://www.safeboatingcampaign.com/>.

Need more information?

- State Parks Boating Program: <http://parks.state.wa.us/451/Life-jackets>.
- 2016 U.S. Coast Guard Recreational Boating Statistics: <http://uscgboating.org/library/accident-statistics/Recreational-Boating-Statistics-2016.pdf>.