

Lifejacket wear and boating safety

For many Canadians, the summer season means enjoying outdoor activities such as fishing, powerboating or canoeing. But each year, tragic and avoidable boating-related fatalities occur across Canada. A Canadian Red Cross report examining these fatalities over 16 years revealed many common factors:

- Only 12% of immersion fatalities were reported to be correctly wearing a lifejacket or Personal Flotation Device (PFD).
- Of all recreational boating immersion deaths during this period, 93% were male.
- Men between 15 and 54 years old accounted for the majority of fatalities.
- Alcohol was a factor for nearly half of these.
- 64% of the immersion deaths resulted from a capsized vessel or a fall overboard with environmental conditions such as the weather, wind and waves as significant contributing factors.

PREVENTION

Always wear a lifejacket or PFD: A properly worn flotation device is the fundamental safety item for anyone heading out on a boat. It keeps you at the surface of the water during unexpected or unintentional entries into water, reduces the initial impact (cold water shock to your muscles) of a fall into cold water, and can help you reach safety. All persons on board, even strong swimmers, should be wearing a lifejacket/PFD.

Be aware of environmental conditions: Check weather and water conditions before heading out and monitor for changing conditions while out. Return to the nearest point of safety if the conditions change. The presence of cold water,



wind, waves, current and darkness make recreational boating activities much more dangerous.

Stay alert and in control: Never consume alcohol before or during a boating outing.

Plan and prepare: Ensure the operator of the boat is experienced, the vessel is loaded properly, and that appropriate safety equipment is on board. An emergency plan should be established ahead of time.

CHECKLIST FOR CHOOSING A LIFEJACKET OR PFD

- Is it Canadian-approved?
- Will it support the person it was made for?
- Are all the snaps, belts, ties, tapes and/or zippers in good condition?
- Is it easy to put on and take off?
- Can you move your arms freely when wearing it?
- Does it let you bend at the waist?
- Can you see the ground at your feet and walk over obstacles easily?
- Does it keep your head above water?
- Can you swim and manoeuvre easily in the water?
- Have you attached a whistle to your flotation device?

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CHOOSING A LIFEJACKET OR PFD

Activities: When available, choose a PFD that meets your particular needs. Today there are PFDs specially designed for various activities including pleasure boating, fishing, water skiing, tubing, kayaking, canoeing and rafting. Note that inflatable PFDs are not approved for persons who are less than 16 years of age, or weight less than 36.3 kgs, as well for those participating in activities where an inherent buoyant (contains permanent flotation) vest is required such as riding a personal water craft, paddling in white water, being towed behind a boat (water skiing, wakeboarding, etc.), or using a sailboard.

Colour: PFDs are available in many bright colours. The Canadian Red Cross recommends bright colours for better visibility in the water.

Size: PFDs must be an appropriate size to be effective. Sizing is based on chest measurements for adults and weight for children—read the label for details. Choose one that is comfortable but snug, and allows free movement.



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