

KEVO'S BOATING TIPS & MORE

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Personal Flotation Devices • Part II

(Part I appeared in the April 2005 issue)

So there I was, staring into the computer screen like Jack Nicholson at his typewriter in "The Shining." My wife Susan asked, "What's the matter?" I said I was having writer's block. She chuckled and said, "Yeah, right... you're a writer." (And people wonder why I cruise around the Bay and Delta in a yacht named *Her Way* and a dinghy named *The Highway*.) Just kidding sweetheart!

OK... This month I'm going to get back to basics. Now that winter is upon us perhaps some of us boaters have a little more time to "bone up" on the different types of personal flotation devices (PFDs) and which ones are appropriate for different uses.

The California Department of Boating & Waterways describes PFDs as the cheapest form of insurance you can buy. I couldn't agree more. In fact, 85 percent of boating accident fatalities could have been avoided had the victim been wearing the PFD they probably had onboard at the time of the accident. I emphatically advise my clients at Pacific Powerboating about the importance of having the proper PFDs onboard and in an easily accessible location everyone knows.

The Law

California law requires all children 11 years of age or younger to wear a type I, II, III or V Coast Guard-approved life jacket while onboard a vessel 26 ft. or less while underway. While this satisfies the legal requirement, I'd like to add my two cents: Children of all ages (especially those who can't swim), should wear a PFD at all times while on deck regardless of the size of the vessel they are on.



Exceptions are:

1. On a sailboat, if the child is in a harness attached to the vessel.
2. If the child is in an enclosed cabin.

In 1996 the Coast Guard approved "inflatable" PFDs. I wrote about these little wonders in a previous article on PFDs. (To read the previous column on this subject go to www.pacificpowerboating.com and click on published articles.) Although these are not required to inflate upon impact with water, they must be equipped with a manual pull cord and oral inflation system.

One of my Pacific Powerboating clients was searching for an inflatable PFD in a child size and could not find one. After researching for this article, I discovered that they are only legal for persons 16 or older. The logic here is that the person wearing the vest has to be capable of making a split second decision that may save his or her life. This responsibility rightly remains with the adults on the vessel.

Five Types of USCG-Approved PFDs for Recreational Vessels

TYPE I Off Shore Life Jacket:

This PFD is intended for offshore/blue water use or where one could encounter rough seas on short notice and where fast rescue may not be possible. A type I PFD will turn most unconscious persons face up in the water. The type I is the most effective PFD in rough water because it provides the most amount of buoyancy (22 lbs.). These PFDs are reversible and come in two sizes: adult (90 lbs. or more) and child (50 lbs. to 90 lbs.).

TYPE II Near Shore Buoyant Vest:

Type II is the most common PFD for inland, calm water where rescue is perceived to be close at hand. Type II is required for recreational boating on all Bay and Delta waterways as well as all California lakes. This PFD will turn some but not all persons face up in the water and is available in the following sizes:

- Infant (less than 30 lbs.)
- Small Child (less than 50 lbs.)
- Medium Child (50 lbs. to 90 lbs.)
- Adult (90 lbs. or more)

There is an assortment of adult sizes based on chest size to choose from. Type II PFDs provide 15.5 lbs. of buoyancy.

TYPE III Flotation Aid:

These are for general boating activities as well as special activities like wakeboarding, kayaking, hunting, fishing, water skiing and canoeing. These PFDs are intended for use in calm water, daylight hours and fair weather. They are designed to keep a conscious person floating in calm water, head tilted back, within quick rescue range.

TYPE IV Throwable Devices - Ring Buoys, Buoyant Cushions:

These are intended to be thrown to a person who has fallen overboard. Vessels 16 ft. and longer are required to carry at least one type IV PFD onboard. These may be throw cushions, buoy rings or horseshoe buoys. Although it is not mandatory, I strongly suggest securing a "throw line"

to this PFD. The reason is if you throw it and miss the man overboard (MOB), you may not be able to get it back for another try. Also, the MOB may miss the PFD but snag the line. These lines are very visible and float for optimum performance.

TYPE V Special Use Devise:

These PFDs are designed for restricted uses or specific activities such as whitewater rafting or windsurfing. These PFDs are only acceptable when used for the activity for which they were designed. The label on these devises indicates which activities they are appropriate for, restrictions or limitations and equivalent performance type. It also compares the flotation capabilities with type I, II and III PFDs. If a type V PFD is intended and approved for commercial use only, it is not legal for recreational use, unless otherwise specified. Special-use types V PFDs have a buoyancy range from 15.5 lbs. to 22 lbs.

Hybrid Devise:

The hybrid PFDs are a variation of the type V PFD and use buoyant flotation material found in traditional PFDs in addition to inflation. These devises must be worn in order to be acceptable for recreational use, except when the vessel is not underway or the wearer is inside an enclosed cabin. These provide 7.5 lbs. of buoyancy when deflated and 22 lbs. when inflated. When fully inflated, these PFDs provide the buoyancy of type I, II and III.

(The specific buoyancy performance will be marked on the label.) Unlike the new inflatable PFDs, these are acceptable for small children weighing between 30 and 50 lbs. It is a good idea to test these devises to be sure they have enough buoyancy for the person who will be wearing it. Also, if this PFD utilizes a CO2 cartridge, it is the responsibility of the adult in charge to inspect for integrity and replace spent cartridges.

Common Sense

Children, the elderly and non-swimmers should always wear a PFD while the vessel is underway. In rough water everyone onboard should wear an appropriate PFD.

When boating in cold water, PFDs should be worn at all times. Why? Because cold water can numb the extremities and slow your reflexes almost immediately. You may not be able to don a PFD if you have fallen into cold water.

All guests and crew should know where the PFDs are located on the vessel. Mark each PFD with the name of the person for whom it is intended. Do practice emergency drills at least once per year. Time it. You will be amazed at how long it takes to get everyone onboard into their appropriate PFD. Face the fact: If you need a PFD you probably need it NOW!

Be safe and happy boating!

As always, feedback is appreciated. I can be reached at 925/890-8428 or kevo@yachtsmanmagazine.com. ✉