



Use and Care for Personal Flotation Devices (PFD)

Personal Flotation Devices (PFDs) are an important component of your aquatic safety practices. PFDs should be used for all boating programs and activities. They should also be used as part of your recreational swimming and safety education programs.

PFD Selection:

PFDs are classified by Type; from I through V by the [US Coast Guard](#). In most cases youth-serving organizations will need to use Types II, III and IV for their swimming and boating activities. The Type should be clearly printed (by manufacturer) on any PFD your organization puts in use. More information about each PFD is available from the [US Coast Guard](#) and the manufacturer, here is some general information about each Type:

Type II – this is a near-shore buoyant vest that is typically bright orange in color and has the classic “horse-collar” design or shape. This PFD is not meant for long hours in the water, will turn most wearers face up in the water when unconscious and comes in sizes from infant through adult.

Type III – this flotation aid is best suited for inland waters where there is a good chance of fast rescue. It is generally the most comfortable and popular PFD and is available in many styles; including the popular vest design. This PFD is not meant for extended survival in rough water, may cause unconscious wearers to go “face-down” in the water and is available in sizes from child through adult.

Type IV - this throwable device is designed for calm water where help is always available. These PFDs come in many designs but are most commonly shaped as a life-ring or boat seat cushion. While these devices serve a purpose as an aid, they are not meant for unconscious persons, non-swimmers or children.

Recreational Swimming:

PFDs can enhance the [safety practices](#) during recreational swim times at your organization’s aquatic venues. All swimmers should have their [swimming ability tested](#) prior to participating in aquatic programs. PFDs can be used with those swimmers that are classified as low-level or non-swimmers. These swimmers should be restricted to the appropriate swim zones and wear an appropriate PFD that has been [fit tested](#) for them. Type III vests are appropriate for low level swimmers that have the ability to “right” themselves in the water. Non-swimmers should wear a Type II PFD that is sized and fitted to them. Type II PFDs are best for non-swimmers because a Type II PFD will generally help these swimmers keep their face out of the water when they are fatigued or distressed. Instructional Flotation Devices (IFDs) such as noodles, bubbles and floaties should never be used in the place of a PFD for low-level or non-swimmers. PFDs do not replace strong supervision and aquatic vigilance.



The US Coast Guard provides these PFD safety recommendations:

Try Your PFD:

- Try on your PFD to see if it fits comfortably snug. Then test it in shallow water to see how it handles.
- To check the buoyancy of your PFD in the water, relax your body and let your head tilt back. Make sure your PFD keeps your chin above water and you can breathe easily.
- If your mouth is not well above the water, get a new PFD or one with more buoyancy.

Wear Your PFD:

- Most drownings occur in inland waters, most within a few feet of safety. Most of the victims owned PFDs, but they died without them.
- A wearable PFD can save your life, if you wear it.

Caring For Your PFD:

- Don't alter your PFD. If yours doesn't fit, get one that does. Play it safe. An altered PFD may not save your life.
- Don't put heavy objects on your PFD or use it for a kneeling pad or boat fender. PFDs lose buoyancy when crushed.
- Let your PFD drip dry thoroughly before putting it away. Always stow it in a well-ventilated place.
- Don't leave your PFD on board for long periods when the boat is not in use.

Checking Your PFD:

- Your PFD is required to be in serviceable condition in order to be used on your boat as one of the required PFDs.
- Check your PFD often for rips, tears, and holes, and to see that seams, fabric straps, and hardware are okay. There should be no signs of waterlogging, mildew odor, or shrinkage of the buoyant materials.
- Don't forget to test each PFD at the start of each season. Remember, the law says your PFDs must be in good shape before you use your boat. Ones that are not in good shape should be cut up and thrown away.

*More information on boating safety and PFDs is available from the [US Coast Guard](#).
Other topical safety resources are available from Safe-Wise Consulting.*