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## Life Jackets Save Lives

Deaths from drowning are preventable tragedies that can affect anyone in, on or around the water. Wearing a life jacket is a simple life-saving technique and more people need know when to wear and how to choose a life jacket.

### Life Jackets and Drowning Prevention

Even good swimmers drown. Water Safety USA members recognize that there are several safety steps required to be safe in, on and around the water ([water competency](#), [learning to swim](#), [supervised access](#), [designating a water watcher](#)). Prevention is achieved through layering these protective measures. The guidance below specifically relates to the use of life jackets in overall water safety.

Wearing a life jacket is a key component of boating safety, along with the knowledge and skill needed to keep various types of craft under control in different environments. Most states require life jackets to be worn by anyone 12 years old or younger. Even though regulations may specify that adults must have a life jacket readily available, the prudent choice is for everyone on board to always wear one. Modern life jacket designs offer comfortable options with minimal restriction on activities.

For swimming activities, key safety components include supervision, swimming ability and a safe swimming area. Whenever those are limited, life jacket use can make a lifesaving difference.

### What To Know

#### Choosing the Right Life Jacket

No matter what the water activity or life jacket style chosen, the most important thing is this: Remember to be responsible—always wear a life jacket when boating and when needed to ensure safety while in or near water.

Not all U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets perform the same way. Some will rotate a person so they are face up if they become unconscious and some will not, so check the label to be sure it is appropriate for your planned activities and the water conditions you expect to encounter; ensure it fits properly; and test its performance so you are comfortable with how it fits and functions. Infants and younger children should wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket with both a collar for head support and a strap between the legs.

Today's life jackets come in a variety of shapes, sizes, colors and materials. U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets are sized by weight. Make sure that everyone is wearing one that is properly-sized. Do not buy a life jacket for your child to "grow into."

#### Try It On

- Check the manufacturer's ratings for your appropriate size and weight. There are many manufacturers and styles so fit may differ.
  - Choose a life jacket that fits properly.
  - Life jackets that are too big will cause the flotation device to push up around your face, which could be dangerous.
  - Life jackets that are too small may not be able to keep your body afloat.
- Make sure the life jacket is properly zipped and/or buckled.
- Check for fit by raising your arms above your head while wearing the life jacket and ask a friend to grasp the tops of the arm openings and gently pull up. The life jacket should not ride up over your chin or face.
- Ensure your life jacket fits properly with no excess room above the arm and neck openings. A snug fit in these areas shows the life jacket fits properly.

## **Who Should Wear a Life Jacket**

- Anyone participating in any boating, paddling or towed water sport regardless of swimming ability.
- Inexperienced or non-swimmers in pool or open water situations when other layers of protection are limited.
- Preschool children—those about 5 years and younger—who are not protected by touch supervision either in or near the water. Touch supervision means being within an arm's reach of the child(ren) at all times.

In addition, it is recommended that everyone who is in or around open water wear a life jacket as an extra layer of protection, especially outside of a lifeguarded area.

### **Anyone participating in any boating, paddling or towed water sports regardless of swimming ability.**

Wearing a U.S. Coast Guard-approved properly fitted life jacket is the simplest life-saving strategy for recreational boating, paddling or towed water sports.

According to U.S. Coast Guard Recreational Boating Statistics in 2018 there were 4,145 reported accidents, 2,511 reported injuries, and 633 deaths on our nation's waterways. A majority of those deaths (77%) were due to drowning and 84% of those were not wearing a life jacket. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers statistics show that for the last ten years most of the water-related fatalities that occurred at their lake and river projects were men (87%) age 18 and older (86%) and 87% were not wearing a life jacket.

Many people who participate in boating or a boating activity including fishing, hunting, paddling and towed water sports generally don't think they will drown because they know how to swim, don't plan on getting in the water, or it is a nice calm day so nothing is going to happen. Alcohol can impair one's judgment and abilities in and around water. While enjoying your favorite boating activity please keep in mind that there is always a risk of drowning so expect the unexpected and prepare for it by wearing a properly fitted life jacket.

### **Inexperienced or non-swimmers in pool or open water situations when other layers of protection are limited.**

Most people associate life jackets with boating, but they can also help provide support for inexperienced and non-swimmers in or around water, including open water, such as lakes, oceans, ponds, reservoirs and rivers, as well as controlled environments, such as a pool, waterpark or lifeguarded beach. Almost half of 10 to 17-year old's who fatally drowned could swim according to available information on swimming in the National Child Death Case Reporting System for 2005-2014.

Inexperienced or non-swimmers, particularly children, are at risk in these settings when supervision lapses or the venue is very crowded. Life jackets provide an additional layer of protection in these situations.

### **Preschool children—those about 5 years and younger—who are not protected by touch supervision; Touch supervision means staying within an arm's reach of the child(ren) at all times.**

An analysis of child death review data found that supervision was missing almost half of the time that a child fatally drowned in a pool.

Swimming aids and water toys, such as water wings, and inflatable water wings and rings, are toys. They may provide some buoyancy in the water, but they do not prevent drowning.

Parents should remain attentive even if their children are skilled at swimming and comfortable in the water. Even though a child has become comfortable in the water, and with wearing a life jacket, constant supervision is still needed when they are in or around the water. Young children do not have the developmental maturity to reliably or consistently follow directions or safe practices, to have judgment or the ability to recognize risks.

Everyone needs to learn how to swim without a life jacket. Can't swim? Enroll yourself and your children in swim lessons/water orientation classes to experience being in the water without a life jacket. Continue the journey of learning to swim and regularly getting in a pool with your children without life jackets.

**In addition, it is recommended that everyone who is in or around open water wear a life jacket as an extra layer of protection, especially outside of a lifeguarded area.**

While drowning in swimming pools gets significant attention, the fact is that more Americans fatally drown in open water. More than half of fatal and nonfatal drownings among teens and young adults ages 15 and older (57% each) occur in natural water settings.

There is also an alarming difference in the number of fatal drownings in open water by gender, with males, and particularly teens and young adult males, at greatest risk. (84% of open water drownings in children ages 0-19 occurring in males, with males 10 to 14 years old 15.4 times the risk compared to females).

Adults are also at risk. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) has found that the majority of water-related fatalities that occurred at USACE lake and river projects nationwide were people age 18 or older (86%), male (87%), not wearing a life jacket (87%), and associated with swimming (54%).

One factor contributing to fatal drownings in open water may be the expectation that because an individual is able to swim in a pool, he/she will be safe in open water. However, open water, which includes lakes, oceans, ponds, reservoirs and rivers, has hidden hazards that can increase the risk of drowning. These include sudden drop-offs, dangerous currents, vegetation and rocks, colder temperatures, difficult-to-judge distances, rougher water including waves, limited visibility and more.

These environmental differences from the pool setting make it important for people who want to swim, wade, or just play in open water to find designated areas for swimming. If swimming outside of a designated area or in an area without lifeguards, people should always wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved properly fitted life jacket appropriate for their weight and water activity.

## Important Reminders

- Make sure your life jacket is U.S. Coast Guard approved.
- Double check that your life jacket is appropriate for the water activities that you and your loved ones will be participating in. Read the label!
- Take the time to ensure a proper fit: right size and right weight rating.
- Check your life jacket – make sure it is in good serviceable condition, with no tears or holes.
- Life jackets are not swim lesson aids. However, exposure to life jackets during swimming lessons teaches a child how it should fit, and how it feels and performs in the water.
- The main thing to remember is that a life jacket is just one of the layers of drowning prevention. Children who have learned to swim or are comfortable in the water or in a life jacket still need other layers of drowning protection, including close supervision, fencing barriers, and lifeguards or water watchers.

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