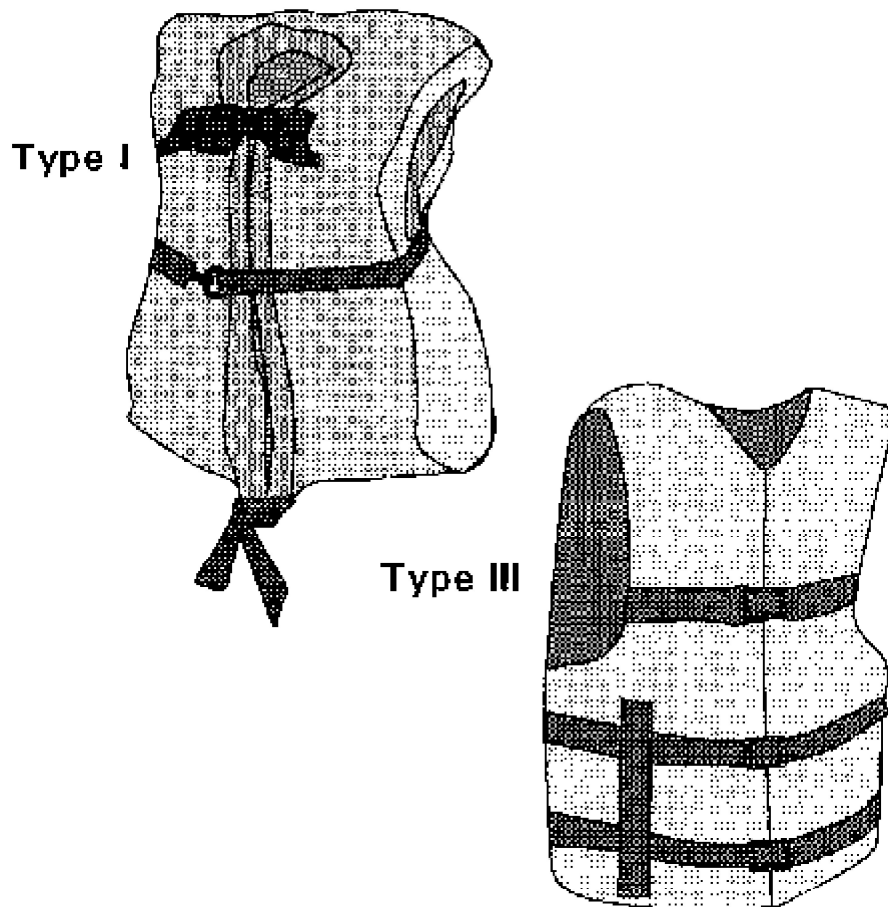


Safety Check-Up

At least once a year you should perform a safety check of your boat and correct any deficiencies.



Life Jackets

Coast Guard regulations require an approved personal flotation device (PFD) for everyone aboard. While a locker full of \$5 Type II vests satisfies the letter of the law, a Type II vest is definitely not what you want in a real emergency. You should have a high-quality Type I life jacket for every person regularly aboard. And make sure they fit. Children can outgrow a jacket in a matter of months, and it is not unheard of for an adult to put on or take off a few pounds in a year. At the very least, buckles should be re-adjusted to the wearer's new size so the jacket can be donned in an instant.

If you do any boating at night, the lifejackets aboard should be equipped with both a whistle and a light. Check to make sure these critical items are functional and secure.

If you need a new jacket, consider an inflatable. Manually inflatable PFDs finally have Coast Guard approval, and they have the advantage of being comfortable to wear all the time. Approval of the automatic ones is still hung up, but that doesn't make an automatic inflatable any less effective at saving your life if you will wear it. PFDs have a distressing habit of being in a locker when the owner suddenly needs it.

Boats over 16 feet must also have a throwable flotation device aboard. An approved cushion satisfies this requirement, but it is a lot easier to stay afloat in a horseshoe buoy. If you have a Lifesling aboard, toss it overboard to remind yourself how to use it and to make sure the tether line runs out freely. The line in some early models tended to resist uncoiling.

Offshore sailors will find greater security in wearing a harness attached to the boat. Examine the stitching, hardware, and tether of each harness. If you are buying a harness, some also incorporate an inflatable vest, providing dual levels of security.

If your boat has lifelines or rails to keep you aboard, make sure they are solidly attached and in good condition. Lifelines in particular lose strength to corrosion. Rust stains coming through the cable cover are a sure sign the lifelines need replacement.

Fire Extinguishers

If your boat has enclosed engine or living spaces or a built-in fuel tank, you must have at least one fire extinguisher, two if your boat is over 26 feet, and three if it is 40 feet or longer. A built-in system counts as one extinguisher, and a large extinguisher (B-II) can substitute for 2 small ones (B-I). As with life jackets, if you have a fire aboard, you will wish you had an extinguisher that lasts longer than 10 seconds—the capacity of the 10-BC units most boats carry.

Whatever size extinguishers you have aboard, you must service them. Start by removing the extinguisher from the bracket and shaking it vigorously upside down—like a stubborn catsup bottle. The motion of the boat tends to compact the dry chemical (usually baking soda) in the bottom of the canister, reducing the extinguisher's already limited capacity.

The gauges on extinguishers are notoriously inaccurate. Weighing is the best way to assess the condition of the internal charge. Weigh a new unit, or call the manufacturer to find out what your extinguishers should weigh. Recharge or replace any that are partially discharged.

By the way, inexpensive extinguishers are nearly always fitted with plastic brackets that are not up to the rigors of the motion of a boat. It is disheartening to reach for an extinguisher in an emergency, only to find an empty bracket. While you are servicing your extinguishers is a good time to replace plastic mounting brackets with heavy-duty metal ones.

Flares

Boats over 16 feet long used in coastal waters and the Great Lakes are required to have three day-use and three night-use distress signals aboard. Flares are the usual choice, satisfying both day and night requirements. Check the expiration date on your flares and replace any that have expired, but do not discard the old ones. Most will perform normally for many years beyond the 42-month life dictated by the Coast Guard regulation.

Despite the day/night rating of handheld and aerial flares, smoke devices are far superior in daylight. If you do not have at least one smoke flare aboard, add this important safety item.

Horn

All boats are required to have some device aboard capable of producing an "efficient sound signal." That is usually a horn. During your inspection, make sure yours puts out a piercing note, not the feeble bleat of a dying duck. If you don't have a spare air canister, put one aboard.

Batteries

Check the date on strobe and EPIRB batteries, and replace them if they have expired. Don't overlook personal strobes attached to the lifejackets. Put fresh batteries in all onboard flashlights, or at least put replacement batteries aboard, and in a spot where you can quickly access them, even in the dark.

First Aid Kit

The first aid kit is often overlooked until you need it. Get in the habit of emptying and repacking it annually. Replace expired pharmaceuticals and renew any bandage materials that show signs of moisture damage. If your first aid manual is not with the kit, find it-or buy a new one-and put it there. It only takes a few minutes to make sure your equipment is up to the task of keeping you safe on the water.