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RISK FACTORS



There are of course, some risks associated with going about in boats. Most risks are manageable with preparation and awareness, along with some knowledge and training in what to do in an emergency.

Boating is a fun and sometimes adventurous activity. Most people participate in boating as a recreational pastime, but for other it is part of their daily living, a means of travel to their cottage, home or work. For some, the water is their workplace.

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Falls & Capsize

The greatest risk occurs in small boats, where a fall overboard or the capsizing of the boat due to waves, wind or overloading can have serious consequences. This kind of incident often happens suddenly.

If you are not wearing a lifejacket of some kind you may easily inhale water in the first moments and quickly be in distress.

This is especially true in colder water where even a good swimmer can be affected. The stress, disorientation and challenge of trying to assist others is very frightening and can be life threatening.

We may be lulled into thinking that we will have some warning or time to put on a lifejacket. Unfortunately, like seat belts in cars, it doesn't work that way. It is very difficult to put one on in the water.

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Ride-up

Sadly, each year some people have died because they did not have their lifejacket snugly fastened and it dislodged when they entered the water.

A poorly sized lifejacket may 'ride up' over the face and impede vision and airway. For those who find themselves in big waves, being jostled around can dislodge a lifejacket and result in the buoyant material not doing its job of lifting the user's head clear of the water.

Some device design include a leg attachment or crotch strap (a ride-up prevention system that helps keep the device down around the body).

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JUST THE FACTS...

Almost 90% of boating fatalities were people not properly wearing a lifejacket.

60% of incidents were falls overboard or capsizing of small boats.

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SWIM SKILLS



For a person to be competent in the water or to be 'able' to swim there are a number of essential skills.

At the most basic, a person learns to:

- control their position in the water,
- clear their airway to take a breath,
- float comfortably to rest and
- use hands, arms and legs to propel themselves in a chosen direction.

Without these basic swim skills a person should choose (and always wear) a Lifejacket with a high level of buoyancy and turning ability. A lower performance device, while helpful as a Buoyancy Aid still needs the conscious action of the wearer to keep the face turned up.

Beyond these basics are many more skills, practice and experience that increase the control, calmness and comfort of a person in the water. Most people's experience with swimming is in the controlled environment of a swimming pool or beach that they have entered voluntarily with a bathing suit on. Open water, where the bottom is irregular with weeds, rocks and drop-offs or deep water where wind and waves are a factor, is a completely different experience. A good swimmer (especially having fallen in with clothes on) tires very quickly and is grateful for the assistance of a lifejacket.

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COLD SHOCK



The Gasp Reflex (ONE minute)

Falling into cold water when you don't expect it can be a shocking experience.

The first thing that happens is that you take a big gasp of air followed by a minute or so of uncontrolled breathing.

Muscles may spasm, senses are overwhelmed and panic can set in. If your face is not well clear of the water (with the aid of your lifejacket) the consequences can be very serious.

Some people purposely enter cold water from a sauna or for charity on New Years Day and find it exhilarating. Don't forget, even on a sunny warm day the temperature of the water can be very different. The effect of cool water on warm skin can still produce a gasp effect.

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Swim Failure (TEN minutes)

In very cold water if you survive the first moments of cold shock you may have 10 minutes or so of meaningful function in your hands and muscles to swim, grab onto your boat or help others in the water.

Very quickly a person can experience a loss of co-ordination and strength in swimming muscles. Depending on the temperature of the water, temperature conditioning and body type even the very best swimmers can experience swim failure.

With waves, wind and currents a swim to shore without a lifejacket is likely to be fatal.

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Hypothermia (ONE hour)

Long term immersion in water leads to loss of heat from the head and body. When the core temperature of internal organs begins to drop the situation is very serious. In freezing water unconsciousness occurs in one hour.

Warmer water allows you more time. It is important to remove yourself from the water by climbing onto something if possible. Even though the air may feel cold, immersion cools you more quickly.

Floating quietly with your head out of the water and limbs tucked in is the best way to preserve body heat. Huddle together with others and stay with your boat or climb up on floating debris for buoyancy and visibility.

Treat anyone with suspected hypothermia very gently. Do not jostle or rub their skin but rewarm the core of the body. Keep them horizontal. Seek medical attention.

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WAVES



There are many different wave conditions that one can experience when boating or swimming. Wind, weather, tide and currents can produce different sizes and types of waves on the same day and in the same location. Sudden weather changes, inexperience and bad luck can cause the capsize of a small boat or a fall overboard. Once in the water a person continues to be tossed about by waves and there is danger of injury, fatigue and mouth immersions.

Stability

Choosing a lifejacket with a higher performance level will usually provide better protection in waves due to increased buoyancy and freeboard. Devices with turning ability will also provide greater stability, making it easier to maintain a face-up position.

Ride-up

Devices are sometimes equipped with ride-up protection systems (RUPS) which may include a leg or crotch strap in addition to the buckles, zips and adjustable straps that keep the flotation material snug about the body and therefore the more lift and freeboard the device can provide.

Mouth Immersions

Offshore devices may also come with face covers that protect the face and airway and cut down on mouth immersions from spray and waves.

TYPES OF WAVES...

white caps

chop

rollers

standing waves (white water)

crashing waves

tsunami

boat wakes

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RESCUE



The most important factor ensuring your rescue is wearing your lifejacket. Not having one on when you enter the water seriously reduces your chances.

The performance level of the lifejacket you choose will affect how long you can survive waiting for help to arrive and your visibility to a rescuer.

Re-boarding

In small boats, a constant wear Buoyancy Aid at the lower end of the performance scale provides immediate protection while allowing you the mobility to climb back on board your boat (SUP, kayak, canoe, dinghy, etc.) effectively rescuing yourself.

Some pleasure craft with ladders or swim platforms at the stern are designed for easier re-boarding. Large boats have to implement and rehearse man overboard procedures which may involve lifting devices or use of rescue rafts and dinghies.

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Turning / Stability

Offshore in wave conditions a lifejacket with a high performance level will serve you better. A device intended for these conditions will have buoyancy distribution that helps you maintain your airway clear of the water.

Visibility

Offshore devices are often equipped with lights, whistles and reflective tape to improve the chances of being seen by rescue boats or aircraft. As use of personal locator devices (plds – epirbs, plbs, etc.) increases, manufacturers are providing pockets and customized attachments for these devices. High visibility colors are recommended or required for offshore devices.

A LITTLE HISTORY...

* Historically, lifejackets were designed with most of the flotation on the upper chest and around the head in such a way that an unconscious person or non-swimmer would be turned face-up automatically. These devices were naturally quite bulky and universally sized as emergency equipment that was stowed on board the boat.

* For recreational boating in smaller boats where it was recognized that more mobility was required, the personal flotation device (PFD) was developed. Although it did not have turning it still provided buoyancy that would float most people with freeboard for their airway at or above the water.

* Eventually, inflatables provided increased mobility for constant wear but when inflated offered the buoyancy, and in some designs, the turning ability of lifejackets.

* New designs are adapted to the activity of the user and the environment in which it will be used based on the performance of the device.

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