



## Boat Talk: Why following legal requirements for life jackets isn't always best advice

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When Barry County Sheriff's Sgt. Julie Jones talks with boaters, she compares the use of life preservers on the water to seatbelts in a car.

Many people think they'll have enough time to grab a life preserver if their boat runs into trouble, but how much time does a driver have to grab for a belt if another vehicle runs a red light?

"Everyone thinks they can put a life jacket on in an emergency, but there's never enough time," said Jones, who works with the sheriff's department's marine unit.

She cited statistics that 90 percent of drowning victims in Michigan each year are not wearing life jackets. Jones couldn't recall a Barry County victim in the last five years who was wearing one.

Over the Memorial Day weekend, members of the Coast Guard this year across all five Great Lakes reportedly saved nine lives and assisted other agencies in 87 other rescues. And the summer is just beginning. Life jackets remained one of the biggest issues during 594 safety boarding checks.



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Type I - Offshore Lifejacket: This PFD is designed for extended survival in rough, open water. It usually will turn an unconscious person face up and has over 22 pounds of buoyancy. This is the best PFD to keep you afloat in remote regions where rescue may be slow in coming.

**Lifejackets** gallery (4 photos)

This week's Boat Talk will hopefully offer the information you need to stay safe and operate under the law while on the water this summer.

Michigan Law requires all vessels to have at least one wearable personal floatation device (PFD) of the right size and fit for each person on board. Any boat, 16 feet or longer, with the exception of canoes and kayaks, must also have a Type IV throwable device.

According to Frank Jennings, Coast Guard Great Lakes director of boater and water safety, this could be a seat cushion, or a life ring like those typically seen on area beaches.

There are a few exemptions, Jennings says.

Federal regulations specifically exempt sail boards, rowing skulls, racing shells, racing kayaks and racing canoes from PFD requirements. But for the common everyday boater we see in the Great Lakes, these rules apply.

Things are a bit different for stand-up paddleboards.

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If the use of a stand-up paddleboard is restricted to a designated surf zone or swim area, PFD's are not required. But once a boarder moves beyond those limits, the paddleboards are treated as any other vessel, and a floatation device must be carried on board or worn.

According to Jennings, seven of eight Great Lakes states have specific laws governing children wearing life jackets — including Michigan. Wisconsin is the only state without a mandatory "wear" law for children. There, federal law addresses requirements for children under age 13.

In Michigan, all children under 6 years of age must wear a Coast Guard approved Type I or Type II PFD while on the open deck of any vessel. These types are specially designed to keep a child's head above water.

Let's take a second here to answer a few reader questions.

One, from MLive reader David Hulings: "We live on our 42' Carver Aft Cabin motor yacht (Forever Mooring). If the grandkids come and visit do they have to have a life jacket on if we are simply tied to the dock?"

The answer? No, said Ottawa County Sheriff's Sgt. Cal Keuning. If a boat is tied up and not technically in motion, children do not have to be wearing a jacket.

But Keuning, who also has children, thinks first of common sense. Kids are on the move — constantly. And the second a parent looks the other way, the child could be in the water and out of sight.

It's better to be safe.

"If your child is near any body of water, have a jacket on them, please," he says.

That same answer goes for another reader who questioned whether life jackets are necessary while teaching grandchildren ages 4 and 6 how to fish. If the children are on a dock or on the shoreline, they don't need to have vests, Keuning says.

But he and Jones, from Barry County, offer the same warning to practice caution.

"Just because it's lawful doesn't mean it's a smart thing to do," Jones says. "A toddler can disappear in a heartbeat when they are running around docks or shoreline."

Adults on a boat are not required to wear jackets, though wearing one is strongly advised. Any jackets not worn must be in an easily accessible place — not stored under a seat or under the deck, Keuning says.

Life jackets must be worn in these circumstances:

- A person under 12 years of age riding on or being towed behind a personal watercraft, like a jet ski must be wearing a Type I or Type II jacket.
- A person over 12 riding on or towed behind a personal watercraft must wear a Type I, Type II or Type III jacket.

On personal watercraft, inflatable jackets do not count, Keuning says. In a boat, an inflatable jacket only counts if it is worn at all times.

All jackets should be in good condition and without tears.

"If you have a 100-pound person, please don't have a 20-pound jacket and expect that will keep you afloat," Keuning says.

**Here's a closer look at the types of life jackets and their best uses.**

*Boat Talk is an MLive column that will run weekly Memorial Day through Labor Day. Have a question you'd like to see answered? Email: [hffenton@mlive.com](mailto:hffenton@mlive.com)*

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