

**Consumer Decision Making Contest
2001-2002 Study Guide
Life Preservers**

Think you're too good of a swimmer to worry about having a life jacket in the boat with you? Well, think again.

In Texas, state law requires that all children under the age of 13 in motorboats under 26 feet must wear a U.S. Coast Guard approved personal flotation device (PFD) – another name for a life preserver. The law also requires that all vessels under 16 feet (including canoes and kayaks) be equipped with some type of PFD for each person on board and they should be stored in a readily accessible area. Vessels 16 feet or longer must have the correct number of PFDs plus at least one throwable device.

It's good to wear your PFD to comply with the law, but it's even better to wear it because you understand why it is important to have it on.

PFDs are potential life saving devices. They can keep you afloat and help you avoid getting too tired to swim to safety. They can also protect you from hypothermia and provide assistance if you are knocked unconscious. Sometimes, boats can develop mechanical problems, an unexpected storm may move in suddenly, or your boat may hit something submerged below the water. No one ever expects an accident, but they can happen to even the safest, most competent skipper. Let's hope you never need one, but just in case you do.....

Shopping for a PFD

PFDs come in a variety of shapes, colors and materials. The most important thing to remember is choosing one that is right for you and is Coast Guard approved. When selecting a PFD, be sure that it is designed for someone your size and your weight. Also, consider the what kinds of boating or water sports you will be participating in because you may need to choose more than one.

Before making your purchase, be sure you try on your PFD. Check to see if it is comfortable, if you can adjust it for a snug fit and if the color will be visible when you are in the water. Your best color choice is either something bright or one with reflecting tape because these are the easiest for rescuers to spot against dark blue or green water.

Reading the label of the PFD will help you determine if it is designed for your body size and for your intended use. If it is labeled with an "impact class," this statement means that it has been tested by water impact for strength at the stated speed. It does not mean that it will give you personal protection, only that it will withstand the impact of going into the water.

Avoid choosing a PFD just because it looks good or is the right price. Take your time to ensure that you are buying the right PFD because it may become your life preserver.

Testing Your PFD

Test your PFD in a pool or shallow water close to shore before heading out. If it fits properly and is correctly fastened, it should stay in place and not ride up or slip over your chin. To ensure it will work properly, all straps, zippers and ties need to be properly fastened and all loose ends tightly tucked away. Be sure that your PFD will keep your chin above the water when you are floating and that you can breathe easily. If your mouth is not above the water, you need to choose another PFD that gives you more buoyancy. You might even want to jump into the pool, feet first, from a platform the same height as your boat. The PFD should not ride up and try to pop off over your head. One word of caution: be sure the water is deep enough before jumping. And, remember, your PFD may not act the same in swift water or heavy seas as it does in your calm pool waters.

Throwable PFDs such as rings and boat cushions should also be tested. Toss them out into the pool or shallow water near shore to be certain they float properly. By doing so, it also allows you to practice throwing them at a specific spot in case you need to use them later.

Types of PFDs

There are five basic types of PFDs:

Type I – The **offshore life jacket** provides the most buoyancy. It is effective in all waters and is especially good for rough, open or remote waters where you may be in the water for a long time before rescue. It is designed to turn you face-up should you become unconscious, an important feature to consider. The Type I jacket comes in two sizes – the adult size provides at least 22 pounds of buoyancy and the child size provides a minimum of 11 pounds.

Type II – The **near-shore buoyant vest** is intended for use in calm, inland water or where there is the possibility of a quick rescue. It will turn some unconscious wearers to a face-up position, but it not as effective as the Type I. It comes in four sizes – the adult provides at least 15.5 pounds of buoyancy, the medium child size provides 11 pounds, and the small and infant sizes provide at least 7 pounds.

Type III – Commonly called a **flotation aid**, this type of PFD is good for calm, inland water where there is a good chance of a quick rescue. It is designed so that you can turn yourself into an face-up position in the water, but you may have to tilt your head back to avoid turning face down. It has the same buoyancy as the Type II. Examples of this device include float coats, fishing vests, and vests designed for the various water sports.

Type IV – A **throwable device** is intended for use in calm, inland waters with heavy boat traffic and where help is immediately available. It is designed to be thrown to a person in the water who can grasp and hold on to it until rescued. Throwable devices are not designed to be worn in the water. They include buoyant cushions, ring buoys and horseshoe buoys.

Type V – The **special use device** is intended for specific activities. Varieties include deck suits, work vests, board sailing vests and Hybrid PFDs. The Hybrid PFD is the least bulky type, and it has an inflatable chamber that must be worn to be an acceptable device. The Type V equipment may be carried instead of another PFD only if it's used according to the approved conditions listed on the label. Some of these devices may provide some protection from hypothermia.

Wearing your PFD indicates that you are a smart and knowledgeable boater. Learning what type of PFD to use sends the message to others that you are a responsible individual and that you care about others' lives, too.

References

Boat Safe Kids <http://boatsafe.com>

PFD Life Jackets, Texas Parks and Wildlife <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/boated/pfd.htm>

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