

U.S. Coast Guard

Minimum Recommended Safety Equipment That Should Be Carried On All Recreational Watercraft

The U.S. Coast Guard has established a minimum set of safety related equipment that should be carried on all recreational vessels or watercraft. The following guidelines should be viewed as the absolute minimum list of equipment that operators of recreational watercraft should have on their vessel. The identified items are by no means inclusive and it is the responsibility of the vessel operator / owner to determine what additional items are required to comply with [Federal](#), [State](#) and [local requirements](#) as well as needed to help ensure the safety of the vessel and its passengers. For instance, some or all of the following may be appropriate to have onboard:

- dock lines and fenders,
- an anchor and sufficient length of anchor line for a 20:1 scope in water were vessel is operated,
- a VHF radio or at least a cell-phone to call for assistance or help in the case of gear failure or an emergency situation develops,
- oars in the event the wind quits, the engine will not operate, or other mechanical failures are encountered.

Preparation, planning, forethought and common sense are perhaps the most important elements in any nautical outing. Although safety is primarily an attitude, familiarity with and adherence to [some basic guidelines and recommendations](#) will help ensure your time on the water is safer and more enjoyable, and that if an emergency does arise you will be better prepared to deal with it.

Personal Flotation Devices:

There are [five classes of PFD's \(Personal Flotation Devices\) or lifejackets](#) designed to keep one floating in the water. Keeping lifejackets in a designated clean, dry, well ventilated and easily accessible storage area on the boat will keep them in good serviceable condition. A lifejacket that has been crammed into a dirty lazette, soaking in dirty bilge water or used as a cushion for an anchor is not an appealing item likely to be used and may not function properly when needed. The ideal place for PFD's when underway is on each person onboard. If they are not going to be worn during the outing, prior to getting underway a specific PFD should be assigned to each person, properly adjusted for them and put on by that person to make sure they know how to use it.

Fire Extinguishers:

Preventing a fire in the first place is the best course of action. Store flammable materials away from flame sources and insure that shifting cargo doesn't accidentally activate aerosol spray cans.

There are three types of fire extinguishers designed to put out different types of fires:

Class A extinguishes ordinary combustible materials including wood, paper, cloth, rubber, and some plastics (things that create Ash).

Class B extinguishers are designed for flammable liquids including gasoline, oil, kerosene, diesel fuel, alcohol, tar, paint, and lacquers (things that can Boil).

Class C extinguishers are for live electrical fires where the heat source is a circuit which is arcing or hot due to overloading (things that Conduct a current).

The Coast Guard requires one to three Type B extinguishers on pleasure boats, depending on whether the boats have an engine and whether there is a permanently mounted fixed extinguisher system in the engine room. A permanently mounted fixed extinguishing system counts as one Type B fire extinguisher.

Some fire extinguishers are rated only AB and can be used only for the first two types of fires, while others are rated ABC and can be used on any type of fire. It is strongly recommended that ABC rated extinguishers be carried on vessels.

Fire extinguishers are additionally classified according to the volume of propellant. A number after the letter refers to the weight of the extinguishing agent. Model B-II type fire extinguishers have twice the extinguishing capacity of B-I.

Lights:

When underway between sunset and sunrise, or when visibility is poor, all vessels are required to display lights in a distinct pattern recognized by all mariners. Knowing these lights instantly in the disorienting absence of depth perception is crucial. Anchor lights are mandatory for boats lying on a hook, and day shapes are to be displayed when anchored, fishing or not under control.

Visual Distress Signals:

Visual distress signals alert other people to the fact that you are in trouble and provide a location for rescuers to find you. There are day signals and night signals.

Day Signals:

Any kind of smoke on the water is considered a sign of distress. Smoke flares throw off bright orange smoke that is highly visible in daylight hours. An orange flag with a black circle and a black square is an internationally recognized day signal of distress. Also, a US flag flown up-side-down is universally recognized. A small, compact signal mirror can reflect sunlight in the direction of rescuers to attract their attention.

Night Signals:

There are three different types of flares for different types of sailing. Handheld flares which are low altitude; long duration flares which burn for up to 120 seconds and allow rescue vessels and aircraft to locate your position; meteor flares are short duration signals that last up to eight seconds at an altitude of 250 to 400 feet; parachute flares are medium-duration high-altitude signals that reach 1,000 feet in altitude and are the best for attracting attention since they can be seen at great distances and stay in the air for at least 25 seconds. The farther

offshore, or the larger the body of water, the larger your visual distress arsenal should be. The Coast Guard recommends three day and night or combination day/night signals for recreational craft over 16 feet. Again this is the minimum requirement; a level wise to exceed considering flares can become outdated, wet, or non-functional when most needed.

Sound Producing Device:

Recreational vessels use sound signals to communicate their intentions when meeting, crossing and overtaking other vessels as well as their position and headway during periods of reduced visibility. Thus, every watercraft should have a whistle, horn, or other devices capable of making an efficient sound.

Through a series of long and short blasts, boat operators are able to communicate how they intend to pass each other, if they are going in reverse or are aground, or if the risk of collision exists. The specific sound signals legally required to be made during periods of reduced visibility such as fog, rain, or snow, as well as when maneuvering in close quarters, in crossing, and overtaking situations are specified in the Navigation Rules.

Sound producing devices can be manually or propellant activated. Care should be taken with all sound producing devices, as hearing can be damaged if the signal is activated close to the ears. If absent from the boat for prolonged periods of time, double check that propellant activated sound signals haven't lost their sound producing ability.