

U.S. Coast Guard Minimum Safety Requirements

Flotation Devices

One Type I, II, III or V Lifejacket for each person onboard or being towed

Fire Extinguishers

At least one type B-I USCG approved extinguishers (ABC preferred).

Sound Producing Devices

Horn, whistle, or any device capable of making an efficient sound signal

Visual Distress Signals

All vessels operating in open waters or used on coastal waters, Great Lakes, territorial seas and waters connected directly to them up to point where a body of water is less than two miles wide, must be equipped with visual distress signals (day, night or combination day/night use). Each device must be in serviceable condition, readily accessible and certified by the manufacturer as complying with USCG requirements. Distress flares, smoke flares and meteor rockets have expiration dates 42 months after date of manufacture (after this date they considered expired and are unacceptable).

In Canada vessels over 18 feet long must carry Canadian Coast Guard approved flares (requirement depends on length of vessel), US Coast Guard flares are not acceptable. These flares are considered effective for 42 months after the date of manufacture.

Backfire Flame Control

Vessels with gasoline engines, excluding outboards, installed after April 25, 1940, must have a USCG approved mechanical means of backfire flame control (Back Fire Flame Arrester) including Sailboats to prevent engine back fires from potentially causing an explosion.

Ventilation

There should be at least two ducts used solely for ventilating every closed compartment that contains a gasoline engine or fuel tank (unless permanently installed which vent outside vessel and contain no unprotected electrical devices. Engine compartments containing a gasoline engine with a cranking motor must contain power operated exhaust blowers which can be controlled from the instrument panel.

Boat owner/operator is responsible for keeping ventilation systems in good operating condition by making sure openings are free of obstructions, ducts are not blocked or torn, blowers, if so equipped, are operating properly and defective components are replaced as needed.

Gas vapors are both volatile and heavier than air, so can accumulate in bilge. Thus, exhaust blowers should be turned on for a minimum of four (4) minutes to evacuate vapors before switching on electrical equipment or starting engines. Diesel engines typically do not require blower use, since diesel fuel (excluding bio-diesel) ignites at a higher temperature and is therefore less likely to explode or catch fire from a spark.

Navigation Lights

Power vessels must carry Port (red) and Starboard (green) sidelights, Masthead (white) and Stern (white) lights. Sailboats must carry Port and Starboard sidelights plus a Stern light. A sailboat under sail should NOT display a Masthead light, as this light is shown only by vessels powered by machinery. A tricolor Masthead light may be used, as may a red over green light at mast head to denote a sailing vessel, although the two cannot be used simultaneously. When a sailboat is motoring, it is required to exhibit a white Masthead (steaming) light.

Legal Requirements & Safety Tips

Class A (Boats less than 16 feet)

Fire Extinguishers

At least one type B-I USCG approved extinguishers (ABC preferred) on boats with enclosed engine compartments, enclosed living spaces or permanent fuel tanks

Visual Distress Signals

Following vessels not required to carry day signals, but must carry night signals when operating from sunset to sunrise:

- Recreational boats less than 16 feet long
- Boats participating in organized events such as races, regattas or marine parades
- Open sailboats less than 26 feet long not equipped with propulsion machinery
- Manually propelled boats

Navigation Lights

Although small sailboats (under 23 feet) are not required to carry sidelights and a sternlight under Inland Navigation Rules, many states require them. If a small sailboat does not have navigation lights, Nav Rules require a flashlight or other white flare-up light to be exhibited in sufficient time to avoid a collision.

Class 1 (Boats from 16 to 26 feet)

Flotation Devices

Basic requirement above, plus one Type IV throwable device

Visual Distress Signals

Following vessels not required to carry day signals, but must carry night signals when operating from sunset to sunrise:

- Boats participating in organized events such as races, regattas or marine parades
- Open sailboats less than 26 feet long not equipped with propulsion machinery
- In Canada vessels over 18 feet must carry Canadian Coast Guard approved flares. US Coast Guard flares are unacceptable

Class 2 (Boats from 26 to 39.4 feet)

Flotation Devices

Basic requirement above, plus one Type IV throwable device

Fire Extinguishers

At least one B-II class or two B-I class USCG approved hand-portable fire extinguisher required (ABC preferred). If the vessel has a fixed fire extinguishing system, at least one B-I class USCG approved hand-portable fire extinguisher required.

Visual Distress Signals

Following vessels are not required to carry day signals, but must carry night signals when operating from sunset to sunrise..

- Boats participating in organized events such as races, regattas, or marine parades
- Manually propelled boats

Class 3 (Boats from 39.4 to 65.6 feet)

Flotation Devices

Basic requirement above, plus two Type IV throwable devices

Fire Extinguishers

At least three B-I class or one B-I class plus one B-II class USCG approved hand-portable fire extinguisher (minimum of one extinguisher on each deck) required. If the vessel has a fixed fire extinguishing system, there must be at least two B-I class or one B-II USCG approved unit (minimum of one extinguisher on each deck).

Visual Distress Signals

Following vessels not required to carry day signals, but must carry night signals when operating from sunset to sunrise:

- Boats participating in organized events such as races, regattas or marine parades