

Personal Floatation Devices in MICHIGAN BOATING

Whether you operate your boat or PWC on an inland lake or on one of the Great Lakes, having the proper Personal Floatation Devices (PFDs) aboard can make all the difference. Besides being required under both State and Federal Law, lifejackets save lives. According to the U.S. Coast Guard, most boating fatalities occur from drowning with 75% of those deaths attributed to boaters not wearing a lifejacket.

The Handbook of Michigan Boating Laws and Responsibilities states that, "All vessels must be equipped with a personal floatation device for each person on board or being towed". The lifejackets must also be a U.S. Coast Guard approved Type I, II, or III personal floatation device, wearable, and of the proper size for the wearer. In addition to the above requirements, there must be at least one Type IV PFD aboard that is readily accessible. To be considered readily accessible all lifejackets need to be out of the original packaging and stowed where they are easy to retrieve in case of emergency. If the PFD is stowed in a cabin under a bunch of other gear there may be no time to get it out of storage and put it on should an emergency situation arise.

For Personal Water Craft (PWCs) Michigan law requires all persons on board or being towed to wear a PFD. PFD requirements are determined by age. All persons under age 12 must wear a Type I or Type II USCG-approved PFD, while all persons over 12 must wear a Type I, Type II, or Type III USCG-approved PFD.

The law regarding children and PFDs in Michigan recently changed and requires all children under the age of 6 to wear a Type I or Type II U.S. Coast Guard approved PFD while riding on the open deck of any vessel. Federal guidelines suggest that children under 12 years of age wear a lifejacket while on deck.



Type I:
Offshore Life Jacket

There are five types of lifejackets each with their own benefits and drawbacks. **Type I: Offshore Life Jackets** are designed for rough water or remote areas where rescue may take a while. The benefit of the Type I is that it provides the most amount of buoyancy for the wearer and will turn most unconscious wearers face up in the water. The Type I also has a built in head rest that will float the wearer's face out of the water. The drawbacks for the Type I are that it is bulky and not comfortable to wear for long amounts of time, and that they are more expensive than other types of lifejackets.

Type II: Near Shore Vests are similar in design to a Type I lifejacket but provide less buoyancy and will turn a wearer face up in the water. The Type II also sports a head cushion to float a wearer's head above the water. Type II PFDs are probably the most common type of life jacket, and are relatively inexpensive. The



Type II: Near Shore Vest

main drawback to the Type II PFD is that they are uncomfortable to wear for a long period of time.

Type III: Floatation Aids are becoming more popular and have a wide variety of styles and colors to choose from including inflatable PFDs. The benefits of the Type III are that they are more comfortable for longer wear, they are generally less expensive than the Type I, and have the style choices that are not available in a Type I or Type II. The inflatable Type III Floatation Aids do tend to be more expensive and require maintenance that the more traditional styles do not. However, they will often provide more buoyancy when inflated than a Type I and less bulk than a jacket style Type III making it more comfortable to wear for long periods of time. The main drawback is that a Type III will generally not turn an unconscious wearer face up, and they are more expensive than a Type II.



Type III: Floatation Aid

Type IV: Throwable Devices are just that—a throwable PFD. They include both ring buoys and foam boat cushions. The benefits of the Type IV are that they can be thrown to a person in distress. A good idea is to tie a line to the buoy before throwing to a distressed victim to help pull them to the boat or retrieve the buoy and throw it again if you don't get it to the distressed person on the first try.



Type IV Boat Cushion & Ring Buoy

The final style of PFD is the **Type V: Special-Use Device**, these include commercial work vests, deck suits, and some designed for special activities like kayaking and wind surfing. The benefits of the Type V are that some provide hypothermia protection, and some provide excellent freedom of movement. There drawbacks are that they are only permitted for certain uses and can be expensive.

In conclusion the PFD is the most important piece of safety gear on your boat and the lifejacket needs to be worn to be effective. Which is the best PFD for you? The best answer is the one that you will wear.



Type V: Deck Suit

Grant Jones is the Division 31 Grand Haven, Staff Officer of Public Affairs and a Vessel Examiner in Training with the U. S. Coast Guard Auxiliary.