



Lifejackets 101

Lifejackets have been saving lives for hundreds of years with the first recorded history of use by Norwegian seamen who used simple blocks of wood. The forerunner of the modern lifejacket was invented by Captain Ward of England. In 1854 he created a cork vest designed to be worn by lifeboat crews for both weather protection and buoyancy. This early style of lifejacket can be seen in the movie the Titanic. It was a useful survival tool but eventually gave way to those made of Kapok. Kapok was a softer alternative to cork which was good news to navy seamen who often wore their lifejackets whenever aboard, including even when they were sleeping.

Now, no one is suggesting that you wear your lifejacket when you sleep aboard, but the message that the Canadian Safe Boating Council and the **Canadian Power and Sail Squadron** has been delivering for years; “Boat Safe, Boat Smart – Wear It” and “It’s Your Life....Preserve It” are certainly relevant for most other times we are aboard especially in smaller open boats. The question is why do we continue to ignore those messages, putting ourselves, our loved ones and friends at risk?

Interestingly, CSBC and Smart Risk's research demonstrates that most of us insist that our children wear their lifejackets. However the willingness to wear a lifejacket drops from 85 percent for children under 5, to a low of 37 percent by the time they reach their teen years and continues to decline significantly after the teen years. So what’s the result of all this complacency and unwillingness to wear a lifejacket?

Across Canada, 89 percent of recreational boaters who drown each and every year were not wearing a lifejacket. Most of these drownings occur in small open power boats, accounting for 60 percent of these preventable deaths. A majority of these victims were males between the ages of 19 and 35, out for a day of fishing. An average of 140 unnecessary drownings occur every year.

Many boaters who drown believe they are good swimmers, so they feel that having a lifejacket on board and within easy reach is good enough. But what good is a lifejacket that is stored under a seat or under the bow going to be when the unexpected happens? Most drownings happen unexpectedly when small boats capsize or someone falls overboard. The lifejacket that you leave behind is not much use, especially in cold water.

Speaking of cold water, in Canada, many boaters like to extend their boating season as long as they can when water temperatures particularly at the beginning and end of season can be very chilly. There are also parts of this country where water temperatures remain cold all year around. Hypothermia is a condition most boaters have heard about, and can lead to many

problems such as disorientation and rapid incapacitation, but the real shocker is found in the new research on sudden cold water immersion.

Death from sudden cold water immersion happens very, very quickly. Research by Dr. Michael Tipton, a leading expert in cold water immersion, has shown that the “gasp reflex” from sudden immersion has led to more deaths than previously known. The reaction causes a sudden uncontrollable gasp, followed by 1-3 minutes of hyperventilation. The initial gasp can cause you to inhale up to 2 litres of water, causing drowning. This volume of water will cause an individual not wearing a lifejacket to sink and not re-appear. If the first gasp of water is not fatal, hyperventilation will lead to the rapid onset of severe hypothermia and death.

So if the “gasp reflex” doesn’t get you initially, you still face the second effect of cold water immersion, cold incapacitation. In cold water your extremities will numb quickly, progressing to make it more difficult to swim and eventually if you are not wearing a lifejacket, swim failure and drowning is imminent. If you are wearing a lifejacket, the third effect of cold water immersion is hypothermia and it can occur in water as warm as 20 degrees.

With all that information, the message should be clear. Having your lifejacket on before you end up in the water will greatly increase your chance of survival. So why don’t we? Some of the common reasons for not wearing a lifejacket are: “they’re uncomfortable;” and “they look stupid.” Well those reasons just don’t fly anymore. Things have changed and there is a new generation of lifejackets in town. Whether they are specialized lifejackets for specific on water activities or the new inflatable lifejackets, they are much more comfortable than the old standard ones and certainly put those old objections to rest.

There are many new, improved (and approved by Transport Canada) lifejackets and all are all designed to be lightweight and comfortable. There is a wide range of styles and colours and all are designed for the type of boating you do and conditions you face. Whether it be paddling, sailing, fishing, water sports or riding personal water craft, there is a lifejacket suited for it.

The new face on the waterfront are the inflatables; the most comfortable, lightweight lifejackets you can buy and are available in vest or pouch styles. Inflatable jackets come standard with manual inflation, but a few models are available with automatic inflation, which instantly inflates the lifejacket when you hit the water. To meet Canadian Small Vessel Regulations, inflatable lifejackets must be worn at all times when aboard and underway and may not be worn by a person under the age of 16, or weighing less than 36.3 kilograms.

When choosing a lifejacket follow these simple guidelines: Choose one that is suitable for the activity you are involved in and check the label to make sure that it is Canadian approved and is of the correct size. Finally, make sure it fits snugly.

If you don't wear your lifejacket, it won't work.