

Buoyancy Aids and Lifejackets

Personal floatation devices come in two main forms buoyancy aids and life-jackets. Worn correctly a personal floatation device could save your life.

A buoyancy aid is designed to keep someone afloat. It allows the wearer full movement whilst an active sporting activity is carried out. However if unconscious, the wearer's head could be face down in the water.

A life-jacket has a buoyancy distribution sufficient to turn the user to a position where their mouth is clear of the water, even when they are unconscious.

RYA Guidance

Making the decision about wearing personal buoyancy is generally based upon factors such as weather conditions and the experience of the crew, however if you are a beginner or still relatively inexperienced, making these judgements is often not that easy. Therefore in order to help clarify when a lifejacket or personal buoyancy aid needs to be worn, the RYA recommends that you wear a lifejacket or buoyancy aid unless you are sure you don't need to.

The RYA strongly recommends that you should always wear personal buoyancy:

- If you are a non-swimmer and there is any possibility of entering the water
- When the skipper deems it necessary
- When abandoning ship
- When you feel you want to wear one or if you are not totally sure that you do not need to wear one.

The personal floatation device needs to be appropriate to the activity and in general the following will apply:

Buoyancy Aids are suitable for:

Using personal watercraft

When sailing a dinghy

Novice windsurfers

Providing safety cover for such an activity

Lifejackets are suitable:

When on an open boat (eg. small powerboat or RIB)

When going ashore in a yacht tender

On a sailing yacht or motor cruiser

Levels of Buoyancy

In addition to selecting between a life jacket and a buoyancy aid, consideration also needs to be given to the level of buoyancy that is required.

Buoyancy aids and lifejackets have different levels of buoyancy. These levels of buoyancy should be considered and influence your choice. There are four main buoyancy levels: 50, 100, 150 and 275.

In general terms, Level 50 is a buoyancy aid designed for when help is close at hand, whereas Level 150 is a general purpose lifejacket used for offshore cruising and motor boating.

Specialist life-jackets are available for infants and children.

You should also consider fitting or buying a lifejacket that is fitted with:

crotch straps to stop the lifejacket riding up over your head

spray-hood to stop waves and spray entering your mouth

lights, dye-markers and personal locator beacons to aid location

harness D ring for harness attachment to stop you falling off in the first place

Crotch straps, spray-hoods and lights are frequently not fitted as standard to a lifejacket, but are really essential to actually keep you alive in the water and aid your location.

Where it was once rare to see people wearing life-jackets afloat, it is now an accepted norm.

Please remember that inflatable life-jackets and buoyancy aids require regular checks and servicing.

The levels of buoyancy information sheet includes further information on levels of buoyancy and the labelling of personal floatation devices.