

Safety When Boating Alone

While boating is often a group activity, there are times when boating by yourself can be just as relaxing and enjoyable. In today's new world of social distancing, it can also be a wonderful respite. At the same time, boating solo has its own share of risks. A sudden slip, the wake of a nearby vessel, or stretching to gaff a fish can send you overboard with no crew to perform a rescue. If the boat is in gear, you could have even bigger problems as the boat will be far away very quickly. Even if the boat is not in gear, it can drift away on the wind and current. Here are some precautions you should take if you choose to boat alone.

Always wear a life jacket. Automatic inflatable suspender style PFDs are a great choice. This style is comfortable and doesn't interfere with activities such as tending lines, manning the anchor and fishing. In addition, the jacket inflates instantly if you fall into the water, and thanks to its hydrostatic mechanism, floats you face up, even if you are knocked unconscious. Prices usually start at around \$65.

Consider wearing a personal locator beacon (PLB) on your belt. When activated, these battery-operated, compact satellite communication devices send out an electronic MAYDAY to rescue agencies, such as the US Coast Guard. The PLB emits a homing signal so that rescuers can zero in on the victim. PLBs must be registered with the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration in order to properly assist rescue agencies. They typically cost between \$200 - \$300.

A handheld digital selective calling (DSC) VHF radio is also a useful tool for solo boaters when clipped to your waistband. A waterproof, floating model with built-in GPS and DSC costs about the same as the PLB. A red button on the back lets you send a DSC rescue call to rescue agencies. In addition, any nearby boat with DSC-VHF radios will get your GPS coordinates. You can also transmit a MAYDAY by voice and converse with rescuers. In order for a DSC enabled radio to function properly, you must register for a Maritime Mobile Service Identity (MMSI) number and enter the information into the VHF. If you already have a MMSI for your boat's fixed mount VHF radio, you can use that same number for your handheld.

Have a "kill switch" for your engines. Marine engine companies refer to these as "safety stop lanyards" while the US Coast Guard uses "engine cutoff". By whatever name, the lanyard should definitely be clipped to your person/PFD when traveling, whether solo or not.

A better option for solo boaters may be a wireless kill switch, because you often have to leave the helm to perform chores such as anchoring or managing dock lines. ACR, Autotether, Fell Marine and Mercury Marine all make wireless devices. These systems rely on either a wrist device or wireless fob that you wear. The device is paired to an onboard module that's connected to the engine kill switch. Triggering factors include distance as well as water immersion. Either way, the effect is the same. The engine shuts down, allowing the boater a better chance at re-boarding the vessel. Again, these safety devices cost \$200-\$300.

If you do end up in the water for any reason, you need to be able to climb back aboard your boat. The American Boat and Yacht Council standards stipulate that all boat builders include a means of re-boarding, solo and unaided, from water level. This translates to a built-in boarding ladder that can be deployed by a swimmer. If your boat does not have such means, you can add one for \$20-\$30.

And, of course, don't forget to leave a float plan with a friend or family onshore.

For additional information on safety awareness and improving your boating skills, please go to marcoboatingclub.org.