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Better boating Stay safe on the water by following a few rules

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This summer, more than 10 million boats will be launched into bodies of water all around the country by people anticipating a day full of fun. But, without the proper preparation, equipment and safety considerations, that day on the water might end up more of a nightmare than a dream.

In 2007, 685 people were killed in boating accidents, according to the U.S. Coast Guard.

The top five contributing factors in these accidents were inattention, reckless operation, passenger/skier behavior, excessive speed, and alcohol use.

“While boating is a fun experience, remember that it comes with responsibilities too,” John Clancy, Outdoor Recreation program manager at Fort Rucker, Ala., said. “In order to have a fun and memorable trip on the water you need to be safe and you can do this by being prepared for anything that could happen.”

Wear it

National Safe Boating Council officials urge everyone to wear their life jacket every time they are on the water because “the jacket will save your life.”

In 2007, the U.S. Coast Guard reported that two-thirds of all fatal boating accident victims drowned and of those victims, 90 percent were not wearing life jackets.

There is no reason not to wear a life jacket today, according to Richard Scott, safety specialist at the U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center.

“The days of the big, bulky orange vest are gone,” Scott said. “Today, flotation devices come in many colors and styles to suit any situation.”

In addition to actually wearing the life jacket out on the water, Scott suggests everyone do a “periodic” test of their equipment by trying to swim while wearing one.



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“Always wear your life jacket while you are on the water,” he said. “Without one, you are taking your life in your own hands.”

Check it

Every boat captain, whether in charge of a 10-foot fishing boat or a 55-foot yacht, should possess a keen understanding of the equipment that keeps them skimming lightly over the water and not sinking beneath the surface. In short, just as a Soldier knows his gun, a boat captain must know his vessel.

“The biggest mistake people make is to assume they already know everything about their boat without ever reading the manual,” Clancy said. “The manuals address many of the common mistakes that are often encountered and a quick read will save boaters time and frustration down the road.”

At the beginning of every boating season, all boats should be checked thoroughly from bow to stern. The Coast Guard Auxiliary offers free vessel safety checks. To find the closest inspector, visit www.vesselsafetycheck.org.

Once the initial inspection is complete, boat captains cannot let their guard down on safety, however. Clancy said a five point safety check should be completed every time a boat leaves the dock.

Checking engines, navigational equipment, communication devices, lights and safety equipment before hitting the water can have a huge impact on the safety of a boating adventure.

“Performing the safety check first is the main difference between having a good day on the water or a bad night stuck waiting for help,” Clancy said.

Check it also applies to weather conditions. Never leave the dock without first checking the weather forecast. If storms are expected, reschedule the trip for another day.

Pack it

Every boat should have some sort of emergency kit on board at all times. Scott said all boat emergency kits should contain at least a first aid kit, personal flotation device for everyone on board and whistle or horn to use as a distress signal.

“The size and contents of your emergency kit will be determined by where you are going, what you are doing and what kind of boat you are in,” Scott said.

Other equipment that should be readily available on most boats to ensure a safe water outing might include a towline, emergency radio, bailing device, fire extinguisher, flashlight, extra batteries, matches, a map of where you are, flares, sun tan lotion and a paddle.

“If your engine quits and you don’t have a paddle, you are just going to be stuck out there flapping your arms,” Scott said.

Follow it

Like drivers, boaters must follow rules established to keep them and those around them safe. Officials at the National Safe Boating Council said knowing the “nautical rules of the road” is an important part of every safe boat trip. Maintaining a proper speed and look out, obeying no wake signs, using running lights as rules dictate, not using alcohol and understanding what to do if there is a threat of collision keeps all boaters safe out on the water.

“Boating can be more dangerous than driving a car, no matter how long you plan to be out on the water,” Clancy said. “In order to avoid some of the more common problems it is important to follow the rules.”

Also, while out, follow your float plan. A float plan outlines information like where the boater is going and when they will be back. A copy of the plan should be left with a friend or family member who will be expecting the boat back at a certain time and can notify authorities if the boat does not return.

A sample float plan is available online at www.floatplancentral.org.

For more information about boating safety, visit www.safeboatingcouncil.org. For more information about the Army's Safe Summer Campaign, visit <https://safety.army.mil>.