

–Another “Boat Responsibly!” Article from the United States Coast Guard –

FOUR LEGS ON DECK! FINDING THE RIGHT LIFE JACKET FOR YOUR DOG

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With the pooch population in the United States at 77 million and growing, it isn't just gundogs climbing into boats these days. Dogs of all breeds can be seen taking in the sun and spray – and adapting just fine, thank you!

Although many dogs are good swimmers, responsible owners shouldn't assume that their dogs can necessarily survive an unexpected plunge – or that they have the good sense not to chase that sea gull over the side.

Dogs are “hard-wired” to chase, and swimming ability varies from breed to breed. Many with low body fat, like Greyhounds, may have trouble staying afloat. Breeds with short legs and long bodies may tire quickly – I know first hand, our beloved Dachshund “Seamore” tired quickly. Overboard, a dog can become disoriented and suffer the same hazards from cold water immersion as humans, including hypothermia. It goes without saying that the bigger the dog, the harder it is to haul them back in the boat.

A faithful friend in trouble can pose a danger for the owner as well. Each year, we (U.S. Coast Guard) log reports from all across the country of dog owners who drown trying to rescue their pets from deep water.

So, before bringing the family pet along on a boating excursion, ask yourself some tough questions: How well does your dog swim? How cold is the water? How long will it take to turn the boat around to retrieve the dog if it falls overboard? Will the dog be easy to spot in the water? How will it get back aboard?

The U.S. Coast Guard recommends that everyone wear a properly-fitting Coast Guard Approved life jacket at all times while boating. Now the same technological advancements that have now resulted in specialized life jackets for every on-the-water human activity have also enabled boaters to extend a similar measure of safety to their pets.

Life jackets for dogs were first introduced in the mid-1990s and have since become highly popular – part of the more than \$40 billion dollars Americans spend on their pets each year. You can find dog life jackets and float coats in pet shops, marine supply stores, and on the Internet, and they come in a variety of colors and styles, including a cool and lightweight inflatable.

Of course, dogs come in an even wider variety, so getting a good fit can be a challenge. Most manufacturers provide size guidelines, but some size their jackets by the dog's weight, some by the dog's girth and length.

Fit is important. The new inflatables - available online or through marine supply catalogs - come in small, medium, and large and with a fully adjustable harness. With other life jackets, very frequently the best bet is just to take the dog into the store for a little nautical modeling. In this, consider comfort and purpose. Look at the width of the straps and where they cross under the dog's body. The straps should not interfere with the dog's ability to sit or lie down, or impede the ability to swim.



Think of color as a safety feature; a bright color will make the dog easier to spot in the water, especially on a gray, gloomy day. Most important, be sure to give the dog's life jacket a “float test,” just as you would in buying one for a person. How much buoyancy does it provide? How will it perform under potentially emergency conditions? You need to know.

Dog life jackets, unlike those for people, are designed to float the animal in a horizontal position. With a standard foam life jacket, try it out on your dog in shallow water and have a harness and leash on them as backup. With inflatables, follow manufacturer's guidelines for testing. With either type, the jacket should support the dog while allowing your dog to swim freely. It should also fit snugly enough that the dog won't slip out of it when wet or when being pulled from the water into the boat.

Which raises another point: A large dog, wet and thrashing, can easily pull a would-be rescuer overboard – a risky outcome for both. The bigger the dog and the more distance between the gunwale and the water line, the more lift becomes an issue. So come prepared. For larger dogs, consider installing a pet ramp or stair to the back of the boat for easy access. Similar to those used to get older dogs into trucks and SUVs, these devices allow the dog to climb aboard safely while saving the owner's back.

Small dogs pose less of a problem. Most pet life jackets have a handle on the back that helps in hauling smaller dogs from the water. With very small dogs it can also come in handy for transferring them between the boat and the dock. Be sure to have a backup plan however. Even a fishing net, attached with line to the boat, can be a useful tool in getting a small dog back aboard quickly.

The best course of action is to make sure your dog only goes in the water when permitted to do so. When the boat is underway, keep your pet safely restrained. A leash attached to a collar can present a choking hazard if a dog bolts overboard, so consider a harness instead. Your pet life jacket, with a D-ring on back for attaching to a leash, can do dual-duty by providing a reliable restraint for an excitable pet.

Floppy ears in the wind can be a cheerful addition to any boating adventure, and when you think about it, dogs really are like family. We pamper them. We surprise them with presents on special occasions. We take them wherever we go. We talk to them (and swear they understand what we say). But we can't expect them to recognize every dangerous situation.

Fortunately for America's nearly 13 million registered recreational boat owners there are sensible solutions for those seeking peace of mind along with furry companionship. The right equipment, along with a little common sense, ensures a safer outing for both of you.

The U.S. Coast Guard is asking all boat owners and operators to help reduce fatalities, injuries, property damage, and associated healthcare costs related to recreational boating accidents by taking personal responsibility for their own safety and the safety of their passengers. Essential steps include: always wear a life jacket and require passengers to do the same; never boat under influence (BUI); successfully complete a boating safety course; and get a Vessel Safety Check (VSC) annually from your local U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, United States Power Squadrons®, or your state boating agency's Vessel Examiners. The U.S. Coast Guard reminds all boaters to “Boat Responsibly!”.

For more information, visit www.uscgboating.org.



PRODUCTS THAT EDUCATE

The new NSBC's Inflatable Life Jacket Kit has hit the stands! In an effort to get the word out about the latest and greatest in life jacket wear, the NSBC, in cooperation with Stearns (now a Coleman Company), put together the Inflatable Life Jacket Educational Kit. For the most part, the public is unaware of how comfortable it can be to wear a life jacket. The Inflatable Life Jacket Kit will educate boaters as to comfort and ease of life jacket wear. The Kit contains three different types of life jackets, an over the shoulder manual inflatable, a lite belt pack and a chest pak. Also included in the kit are extra cylinders so that an instructor can demonstrate how to use the life jackets and an educational flip chart and CD. The Inflatable Life Jacket Educational Kits sell for \$300 each. This price includes shipping (within the continental United States).

The Boating Safety Instructor Classroom Kit is another product the NSBC has available. The kit contains 6 types of life jackets, a visual distress kit, demo size buoys, several boating safety education videos, CDs, DVDs and much more. All items come in a lightweight, heavy-duty case equipped with pull handles, reinforced corners and wheels. The Instructor Kits sell for \$650 for NSBC member organizations and \$800 for non-members. The price does not include shipping.

The very popular Boating Safety Sidekicks booklet is still the best deal for educating kids to boating and fishing safety. These great booklets promote boating safety to our young boaters in a fun, energetic way. The Sidekicks booklets come in three versions. Boating Safety Sidekicks promotes general boating safety. Boating Safety Sidekicks “Go Fishing” promotes boating and water safety while fishing. And Boating Safety Sidekicks “Go Paddling” promotes boating safety while paddling. The Sidekicks booklets sell for \$120 per case for NSBC member organizations and \$140 per case for non-members. This price includes shipping (within the continental United States).

For more information on NSBC products, visit our web site at <http://www.boatingsidekicks.com/sidekicks.htm> or call the NSBC office at 703-361-4294.