

What You Need to Know for Safe Boating

Check to See if You Know Everything Important

By [Tom Lochhaas](#)

In most states in the U.S. and elsewhere, no license or even a safety course is required to get in a boat and go. Many sailors and boaters have simply learned from friends or others - and may not be aware of certain hazards on the water until it's too late. Sadly, hundreds die in boating incidents every year that often could have been prevented with a little foresight or education.

Following is a list of the key things you need to know to stay safe on the water. This list is based in part on the national boating education standards from the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators, which form the core of many safe boating courses.

As you read down the list, be honest with yourself about what you know or don't know. Then take the time to fill in the gaps in your safety knowledge. If there's a lot you're not sure about, take a course such as the sailing safety course from the Coast Guard Auxiliary, available in most coastal areas throughout the U.S.

Know Your Boat and Equipment

- **Know your boat's capacity (people and weight), and don't exceed it.** Capsizing is more likely with an overloaded boat.
- **Know the law about PFDs, and use them whenever you're on the water.** This includes different sizes and types of PFDs and throwable devices. (With [inflatable PFDs](#), know when and how to service them.) [Most fatalities](#) occur by drowning - when the victim never intended to enter the water.
- **Know the law about all [equipment required](#) to be present on your boat, based on its size and other factors.** This may include fire extinguishers, navigation lights, visual distress and sound signaling equipment, and for boats with gasoline engines, a ventilation system and backfire flame control device.
- **Maintain your boat.** Routine inspections and [maintenance](#) help keep everything running well, reducing the risk of an incident when underway. For example, [changing the engine oil](#) helps prevent problems that could occur at the worst possible time.

Prepare Before You Head Out

- **Know your state's boating laws.** A boating safety course may be required, some passengers or operators may be required to wear a PFD at all times, additional equipment may be required, etc.
- **Always check the weather, the forecast, and local conditions.** There are lots of sources for weather and conditions information, including [NOAA forecasts and buoy reports](#) as well as many [apps](#) for your smart phone or device. [Monitor weather conditions](#) for changes, which may occur quickly on the water.
- **Be aware of water hazards in your local area.** Paper charts and [chartplotters](#) often depict hazards - be sure you check closely whenever entering a new area.

- **Follow safe procedures for fueling the boat, especially with a gasoline engine.** Vapors and spills can cause a fire or explosion. Be careful also to avoid spills that can threaten the marine environment.
- **File a [float plan](#) before you leave.** This may be a written document for a complex itinerary over a period of time - or simply telling a friend to call for help if you're not back by a certain time. Many boaters have been rescued after someone else reported them overdue.
- **With new guests or crew, give a show-and-tell [safety orientation](#) before heading out.** The middle of an emergency is not the time to explain how to operate the radio if the captain falls overboard or has a medical crisis.
- **Develop and use your own [checklist](#) appropriate for your boat.** This is like the preflight check every pilot does before taking off - and boaters should do it for the same reason.

Operate the Boat Safely

- **Pay attention.** Coast Guard statistics show that "operator inattention" is the leading cause of most boating accidents. Keep a lookout for other boats, but also pay attention to what is happening on your own boat.
- **Know and follow the "Rules of the Road."** This includes maintaining a safe speed, knowing who has [right-of-way](#) when two boats meet, and other aspects of navigation, including understanding aids to navigations (such as channel markers).
- **Learn how to safely [anchor](#), [moor](#), or [dock](#) your boat.** Accidents are common at these times.
- **With a sailboat, be sure you know how to perform maneuvers safely under sail.** Take a [sailing course](#) if you aren't sure. For example, many sailors who experience an accidental [gybe](#) are knocked overboard or injured by the boom.
- **Take precautions whenever the boat's engine is running.** Know how to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning from engine exhaust. Know how to prevent anyone from being struck by the propeller.
- **Follow safe practices for all activities on the water.** This includes the use of personal watercraft, water skiing and towed devices, diving or swimming, fishing, etc.
- **Don't drink and drive.** It's the law, the same as with a motor vehicle, and alcohol and drugs cause many boating accidents and fatalities every year.

Be Prepared for Emergencies

- **Expect emergencies.** They usually happen when not expected - and being [prepared in advance](#) can make the difference between life and death. Know what to do if someone [falls overboard](#), if the boat capsizes, if [strong winds](#) suddenly occur, if the [engine dies suddenly](#) at a dangerous time, etc.
- **Understand the risks of boating in [cold water](#) or cold weather.** Take action to prevent hypothermia.
- **Prevent seasickness when possible.** Advance [preparations](#) can help prevent incapacitating illness that can threaten the safety of people on the boat.
- **Know how to use your boat's fire extinguishers.**
- **Prevent running aground.** It sounds simple, but even with modern electronics lots of boaters still run aground, a cause of boat damage, injuries, and fatalities.
- **Know that you have a responsibility to assist another boat in distress.**

Most of the topics listed above are covered in safe boating courses - take a course if you are not fully confident that you know and already practice all these guidelines.