

PFD Guide for Kayakers

Graphics by GeoOdyssey

The wide selection and range of life vest types can be confusing at first. A Personal Flotation Device (PFD) is required, one for each person on a vessel (boat), including kayaks. With a little bit of wisdom under your belt you can know the ins and outs of how to select, use and care for a PFD.

To start with PFDs come in several basic classifications. Bear in mind that most Coast Guard approved PFDs, and the intensions behind them, are geared to boats, and not necessarily paddle craft. The classifications below are for Coast Guard approved vests. Look for the Coast Guard approval printed directly on the vest, **anything else is not a true PFD.**

Type I Off Shore Life Jacket is commonly used onboard larger vessels. It is best for open waters far from shore, rough seas, remote locations and when rescue may take a very long time. This type will turn the user face up, even if unconscious. They are bulky and are largely meant to be worn only when needed. This style would be typically found on board a ship.



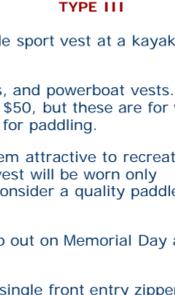
Type I

Type II Near Shore Buoyant Vest is common on board pleasure craft, powerboats and sailboats. It is best used on calmer, protected waters, inland waters and locations that have a good chance of quick rescue. This style will turn most wearers face up. It is less bulky than a Type I making them easier to wear while on board. The Type II is typified by the orange "horse collar" vest that many of us older paddlers remember from our youth, perhaps at summer camp. Most folks will find them less than comfortable.



TYPE II

Type III Flotation Aid is meant for calm inland waters where there is a good chance of rescue. This style is considered the most comfortable and allows for the greatest freedom of movement. As such a Type III is the best choice for paddle craft. A huge variety of Type III PFDs are available for all kinds of active water sports, power and non-power. A Type III will not keep your face out of the water if unconscious.



TYPE III

Type IV Throwable Device is meant to serve as an additional PFD onboard. While it may, or may not, be considered acceptable as your sole PFD on board (check with your local boating authority) it should only be used as your back up PFD for paddle sports. A Type IV is however great to have as cushions in canoes (for sitting or kneeling) and handy for many tandem sit-in kayaks. A Type IV is also smart to have on hand, in easy sight, at any dock or water front property that is frequently used.

Type V Inflatable Device is just as it sounds, air filled when the floatation is needed, flat when not. It is the least bulky by nature and to some considered the most comfortable. The Type V may be equal in performance to a Type I, II or III, as noted on the label, and may keep face out of water. A Type V MUST be worn at ALL times to be considered your sole PFD. The style of Type V common for paddle sports will need to be activated manually when the floatation is needed. (Automatic inflation is not necessarily wise for kayakers.) Type V PFDs come as a fanny pack, a vest or simply one that looks like suspenders. The belt pack (fanny pack) style will take extra steps to wear and inflate.

Kayaker PFD Choices

This article will proceed by addressing the Type III PFD in detail, Type V and Type IV will also be touched upon.

All paddlers should wear a life vest when on the water. The Type III is what paddlers wear, to the largest extent, and to some degree the Type V. I know that some of you out there will object to wearing your vest, and to you have your reasons for good or ill. You will however be required to have your PFD on board within easy reach. A Marine Patrol officer may actually test your ability to put on your vest quickly, so do not stow it inside a cargo hatch, lash it difficulty to the deck, or place it too far out of reach. Indeed the best place to stow your vest is ON your body and if you are going to wear it might as well be fully zipped and/or strapped

Recreational Kayakers

Recreational kayakers are the largest segment of paddle sport participants. I define them as people who are out for a casual experience, typically in a rather small boat, sit-in or sit-on, paddling short distance, easy waters in warm and gentle conditions. Their best bet is a Type III, and to shop for a paddle sport vest at a kayak specialty shop.

Type III jackets come in many styles and types, from water skiing vests, to Jet Ski vests, to sailing vests, and powerboat vests. Yes, the big box stores will have nice looking vests with about a half dozen buckles up the front, for less than \$50, but these are for water skiing and Jet Skiing. If the PFD indicates a speed limit in the fine print on the inside of the vest it is not for paddling.

Some of these department store vests are for fishing and boating. They may have features that make them attractive to recreational paddlers. Mesh netting shoulders, fewer buckles, zippers and belts, maybe even a very low price. If the vest will be worn only because of these features then by all means get it for recreational kayaking. I will however urge you to consider a quality paddler's PFD.

If you must go with a non-paddle sport vest I would hope that it is as a spare, and for those who only go out on Memorial Day and Labor Day Weekends for a couple hours on a lake or pond.

A rec paddler need not get an expensive pro kayaker's vest. A simple paddler's vest will typically have a single front entry zipper and possibly be a universal size. This type of vest will be comfortable for paddling and offer you the freedom of movement that paddle sports require.

Some sit-on-top and sit-in-side recreational kayakers have a tall seat back. If so, look for a vest with a netback, thin back panel, or partial back panel. A PFD with a long full-length back panel can also work well with a taller seat back. You may have to test sit your kayak to ensure a comfortable match, or tinker around with a variety of PFD and SOT seat combos.

Sea Kayakers

Sea Kayakers, largely using touring sit-in-side sea kayaks, will be best served with a high quality Type III paddle sport vest that has a waist belt, side and/or shoulder adjustments, and comes in sizes (XS through XXL etc). You need not consider Type I & II.

I will categorize this group of paddlers as adventures, paddling touring style sit-on and sit-in kayaks. They may be crossing the surf zone, navigating tidal races, paddling long distance in remote and lonely places or be surfing waves. Anyone who will be out on open waters, possibly in choppy windy and remote coasts should have jacket that is sized well to the user and fits comfortably and snug. It will be imperative that the vest not ride up, or slip off, when one "takes a swim".

Sea kayakers, or touring kayakers should stay out of the department stores and shop at a kayak specialty store. Look for a vest with at least one pocket to stash a whistle and other stuff like lip balm. It is up to you what you want to carry in your pockets, maybe a VHF radio, or camera, but less is best. Get a vest that will fit over any of the water garments you may want to wear. Look for a high waist and fairly large armholes. Typically vests with thin flexible panels, covering large portions of the torso, are best for touring.

Sit-in-side kayakers will want to take into consideration their skirt. While most PFDs for paddling are very skirt friendly you may find that some of the high flotation vests common for white water rafting, and conventional powerboat vests, are too long. On the other hand most sit-in touring and white water kayaks have short back bands for support and will not have an issue with longer thicker back panels on some PFDs.

Sit-on-top sea kayakers more often have the taller seat back style. Alternatively a high waist PFD in combination with a shorter back band would also work for a performance minded SOT paddler. If your seat back is tall look at vests with a netback, thin back panel, or partial back panel. A full-length back panel PFD may work well with a tall seat back. Test sit your kayak to ensure a comfortable match of PFD and Seat. Experiment with a variety of PFD and SOT seat combos.

Bear in mind that both sit-on and sit-in kayakers should be cautious of PFDs with a very bulky front panel and pockets loaded up with a bunch of stuff. Sit-in paddlers will need to lay on the deck of their kayak, face down, while maneuvering into the cockpit during a self or assisted rescue. Sit-on-top paddlers will need to pull their belly over the gunwale during deep-water re-entry. Excess bulk on the chest can inhibit these actions.

Kayak Surfers

Kayak surfers, sit-in and sit-on, should look for a high quality vest with large arm holes for freedom of movement. It should be fitted for size and have multiple adjustment straps. A well fitting and snug vest will be imperative in the surf zone. You will not want to slip out of your vest if you take a tumble in the surf zone. OK, now I will contradict myself.

Yes, there are some long time watermen (water women too) who may have started out board and/or body surfing who will object to using a vest in the surf zone. Local regulations will likely require that you carry a PFD on board while paddling a kayak, and this probably applies to wave skis too. Stowing a vest on board will be cumbersome. I suggest your wear it. If you strongly feel that you may need to "ditch" your PFD in order to duck dive under waves then look for a snug, well-fitted vest with a single zipper or buckle entry. Now I do not say this lightly, so if you are inclined this way you had better be a damn good swimmer and know your limits (limits change as you get older). (See SUP and WW below for more info.)

White Water Kayakers

White water kayakers, sit-in and sit-on, should also look for a high quality vest from a white water specialty shop. Look for large armholes for freedom of movement. It should be fitted for size and have multiple adjustment straps, including a waist belt. A well fitting and snug vest is key to your safety. You do not want the vest to slip off or ride up if you "swim". Vests for white water (and surfing too) are more commonly made of thicker panels that cover less torso and allow a great deal of freedom of movement. White water river kayakers typically do not perform deep-water rescues such as touring sit-in and sit-on paddlers do, as such the extra bulk on the chest panel is worth the extra freedom of movement.

Stand Up Paddle Boarders

Stand Up Paddle Boarders (SUP) are now required to wear, or have on board, a Coast Guard approved PFD. The only exception is while in the surf zone (a SUP is essentially a large surf board). A vest for SUP can be tailored with long panels more to the standing position, like a boating vest.

A Type V is popular for stand up paddling, but must be worn at all times to satisfy the regulations. It is usually difficult to stow a PFD on a SUP, unless the deck has been fitted with storage net(s). Turbulance in the surf zone can dislodge cargo that is not highly secured. Again, you are best to wear your life vest, rather than stow it.

Canoist

A PFD for use with a canoe does not necessarily need to be an expensive pro vest. A simple paddler's vest will typically have a single front entry zipper and possibly be a universal size. This type of vest will be comfortable for paddling and offer you the freedom of movement that paddle sports require. The longer waist jackets may be comfortable while seated on a canoe seat, and certainly if you are inclined to kneel. While it is unlikely that you will tip canoe, on calm flat water, you are likely to spend a great deal of time in the water waiting for rescue, or implementing your own rescue. As such the features found on more costly pro vests, such as waist belt, multiple adjustment straps and shoulder straps, will provide a better fit while swimming. If you are a risk taker type of canoe paddler a pro vest will be a good choice. This applies to all white water canoe paddlers too, see the white water section above.

Inflatable PFDs - Type V

The Type V Inflatable PFD approved by the USCG is a compromise, allowing that the while the Coast Guard would have preferred you wear a standard PFD, they do understand that if you do not wear one, it will do no good anyway. So with the understanding that many of those persons who will not wear a standard PFD will wear a Type V Inflatable, the net gain of PFD wearers was worth the approval. In many regards the Type V has the features of the offshore style life vest and will keep an unconscious wear's head and face above water, a plus, but one that may be outweighed by the extra step to inflate, and maintenance.



Type V Hybrid Inflatable

Type V Inflatable PFD must be worn, MUST BE WORN, for you to be compliant with USCG and local Marine Patrol regulations. The reason is that it is too difficult to put on a Type V Inflatable PFD while in the water. In fact it is even difficult to put on a regular life vest while in the water, makes you think twice about wearing it. Wearing an inflatable PFD is no hardship; they are very comfortable, non-bulky and cool.



Type V Inflatable

Most Type V PFDs for paddles sports will require the user to pull a "rip cord" and activate the inflation mechanism. It will be labeled: "Jerk To Inflate". These vests can also be inflated by mouth if need be, as a back up. A small compressed gas cylinder is fitted into the vest with a trigger. Once the gas cylinder has fired it must be replaced along with the trigger in preparation for the next outing. A certain amount of maintenance and inspection is required. My suggestion is to have some spare cylinders and triggers on hand. Once the PFD has seen a season or two you should pull your ripcord, for fun and practice, in a controlled water environment, not far from shore. This will give you experience with the PFD, test it, and then outfit it with a fresh cartridge. Do this periodically. Some Type V PFDs will fire automatically when submerged. This type may not be the most convenient for paddlers. Look carefully at the label before purchase.

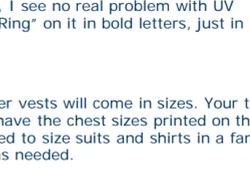
There are three types of Type V. One is worn around the neck and shoulders, and looks a bit like a pair of suspenders. The 2nd looks like a vest that one would wear under a suit coat, and may be fitted out like a fly-fishing vest. These two are the most secure and dependable models to get. The 3rd type is a waist belt with a fanny pack. This last type is problematic. It will require extra actions to use, assuming you are wearing it on your waist to start with, and not around your neck. It must be opened, placed over the head, behind the neck, possibly tied at the neck/chest and finally inflated. These extra steps are sometimes impossible in difficult conditions. As such this fanny pack style should be used on fair weather days in the safest of conditions. Indeed even the suspenders and vest style require that you pull the ripcord, a step that would be impossible if unconscious, such as stuck by a jet ski from behind. The best reason to get a Type V is if it is the only PFD that you will actually wear. Another reason might be maximum portability and travel, such as folding and IK paddlers might need.

I do not recommend the Type V PFD for any activity that may involve the possibility of becoming incapacitated (or for those who are prone to become incapacitated). White water rapids, kayak surfing, high power boat traffic, rock gardens and sea caves all are activities and environments that require a standard PFD to be worn, part a Type V.

There is the **Type V PFD hybrid**, part a solid foam, part inflatable, the best of both worlds, so to speak. This vest is relatively rare and I do not have any personal experience with them. They do seem to be a good compromise and may be a good option for some one who cannot make up their mind, or needs the features of both Type III and V.

Type IV Throwable PFDs

The Type IV Throwable is simply that, a float to throw. There are two types, a life ring, as you would imagine the Titanic was outfitted with, and a Boat Cushion. The square foam filled PFD with handles are best used as boat cushions. Extrasport calls them Boat Tushions, knowing that you will sit on it. By the way, do your very best not to sit on your life vest. What ever you are protecting your rear end from is slowly ruining your fancy life vest. Bring a camp chair if you really need from a picnic seat.



TYPE IV

Maybe you have heard it before: Throw, Distress, Go. ...Or... Throw, Distress, Go. That means that when you see a swimmer in row, the 1st line of action is to throw a float or rope. Next is to row a boat (kayak?). Do so only if you feel you can handle a panicked swimmer grabbing and tipping your kayak in a desperate struggle to climb aboard. (Present the bow 1st, and tell them to hug it.) So then the "other" next action may make more sense, reach, and this means with a long pole, paddle, oar, maybe a fishing rod. Lastly go for help. Personally I like the throw notion, and a Type IV is perfect for it. **(So is a rescue throw rope bag.)** It would be fun to practice throwing IV and *Roops* on a hot sunny day at the beach. I believe there is a gas cartridge USCG approved inflatable version of the Type IV but the throw distance may be limited.



TYPE IV

If you have a canoe I suggest that you have a few Type IV on hand for kneeling, 3rd passenger seating, and as extra emergency gear. (A canoe can handle a little extra cargo.) This will apply to recreational tandem kayaks that have a single cockpit. You may be quite inclined to ride a small child (or dog) and the something to sit on will be nice.

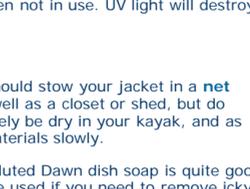
If you have, or frequent, a waterside property, such as a beach, launch, dock, riverside or embankment, it would be handy to have a Type IV at the ready in case someone falls in and needs help. A boat cushion may take some wear and tear from sun exposure if left out 24/7 365 days a year. In that case a life ring may be a good choice. But if you have a waterfront summerhouse, or visit a favorite fishing pier, and plan to hang a boat cushion in plain view for the weekend or the day, I see no real problem with UV rays. You may even want to take a magic marker and write "For Emergency" or "Life Ring" on it in bold letters, just in case people need a bit of a hint for what the purpose of it is for.

Choosing The Right PFD For You & Yours

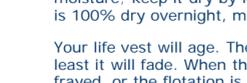
When shopping for a PFD some will be "one size fits all" (read as "fits average people"). Other vests will come in sizes. Your t-shirt size is a good, but crude, rule of thumb. Selection using chest size is best. Some vests may have the chest sizes printed on the inside of the jacket. Men, you may want to check your measurement, it would be the same one used to size suits and shirts in a fancy store. Check the manufactures catalog, website, or ask for help from a paddle sport expert as needed.

PFD Fit & Comfort

Fitting your PFD is simple, but maybe not intuitive. Select a size. Zip or buckle up the vest. Tighten side and/or shoulder straps if equipped. Adjust waist belt if equipped. Tighten side and/or sitting in your boat. While seated have a friend grab the shoulder straps and pull up. Your friend should be almost able to lift you by your vest and your head should NOT retreat into the jacket like a turtle in his shell. Bear in mind that some simple PFDs will not be up to this standard test, they simply lack the adjustment straps.



Real life testing fit is important. Try first, DRY, with the jacket, seated in kayak and simulate paddling. If the dry test passes comfort, seat/skirt integration and fit to body, then a wet is next. Remove tags in preparation of the wet test. (Return of vest with tags still on will go much smoother.) Select a body of water that is calm and easy to walk into and out of. Have a buddy stand by if needed. Wade into water, over your head, with the PFD fully zipped/strapped and adjusted. Your chin should be above water, with no ride-up, you must be in the over your head, or not touching bottom. PFDs have buoyancy ratings printed on the inside. Get a PFD with enough buoyancy if your chin is not above water during testing.



Crotch straps may be needed for pear shaped folks who's vest ride up during water trails. Crotch straps and vests that utilize them are hard to find. White water rafting supply shops may be the best source.

Flotation Collars on some PFDs will help to keep a person's head and/or face out of the water. This feature is not common on Type III vests, and is only found on some white water rafting vests and offshore boating vest.

Rescue vests with tow belts are meant for highly skilled and trained paddlers. Seek extra paddle sport education if you plan to use this style of PFD.

It may be good to have one or two "one size fits all" PFDs in your gear bag for use as loaner vest when friends want to borrow or try your kayak, canoe or SUP. It will be impossible for an XXLRG person to wear your XS vest. And, not a good fit for an XS person to wear your XXLRG PFD. It would not be "nice" to loan out your boat with out suitable safety gear for the user. The last thing you want to do is jeopardize your friends.

Caring For Your PFD

The care of PFDs is fairly simple. After use the life jacket should get a good rinsing to wash away salt residue and contaminants such as body oils, sunscreen and assorted dirt. Let the life vest air-dry completely before storage. Some exposure to the sun during the drying process will actually kill bacteria and mildew; so let the sun shine on both the outside and inside of the vest for a only short while. Other than a gentle exposure to the sun, keep your life vest out of direct sunlight when not in use. UV light will destroy your vest as surely as a bad dog will chew our shoes.

Important PFD Care Tips:

Once fully dry put your PFD in storage that will keep it dry and clean. Ideally you should store your jacket in a **net gear bag** for air circulation, just in case it was not 100% dry. A plastic bin is ok, as well as a closet or shed, but avoid to protect from mice and other critters. Inside a kayak makes some sense, but it will rarely be dry in your kayak, and as such will invite mildew. Mildew is not just cosmetic; it actually will break down the materials slowly.

If you should feel the need to clean your PFD use a mild soap or diluted detergent. Diluted dish soap is quite good at removing oils, sunscreen, and assorted gunk. A very dilute cleaner like Lysol can be used if you need to remove icky stuff, like fish slime and blood, foul water, food residue and assorted slime. Less is more. I like to "retire" my empty dish soap or Pinesol bottle out to the kayak shed when there is not enough left in the container to use for dishes or mopping. Sometimes I do the same with shampoo bottles. I fill a tub or plastic bin with cold water and squeeze the empty bottle so it sucks up some water and then squirt it back into the tub. Do this a couple of times and that is how dilute your cleanser should be. Or in other words, no more than a capful. Never use bleach.

Next step: Serious dunking. Do not rub or scrub unless necessary. Dunk it repeatedly and vigorously in the tub full of wash water. Let it soak a bit if it has icky stuff on it. Next, rinse thoroughly, in a tub of clear water, or with a good dousing from the garden hose. Air-dry in the sun until dry to the touch; finish drying off in the shade. Mildew loves moisture; keep it dry by letting air circulate until bone dry. Do not seal a freshly dried PFD in a bag or box; make sure it is 100% dry overnight, maybe over the weekend.

Your life vest will age. The foam will get stiff and lose buoyancy, the fabric will tear, mildew will spot it up, at the very least it will fade. When the PFD shows its age give it careful inspection seam to seam, strap by strap. If the vest is torn, frayed, or the flotation is compromised you should retire (throw out) the life jacket and get new. I believe that a repaired PFD may not actually be considered USCG approved anymore. You certainly do not want to experience a major tear, or have a foam slab float out, when you need your life jacket the most.

In review: Understand the selection of PFDs that is offered. Select the appropriate style and size of PFD to suit your needs and the type of paddling you will be doing. Preparation for fit and function when new. Inspect it for wear when old. WEAR YOUR LIVE VEST WHEN ON THE WATER.