

# Tips for Avoiding Boating Accidents

When you examine boating accidents and their causes, one finds that most stem from the most mundane, and in most cases, avoidable events. Here are some ways to avoid accidents:

## **1. Wear a Life Jacket**

According to Coast Guard statistics, about half of the drowning fatalities in boating involve boaters without life jackets. Stowing your safety gear below deck, in the cabin, or under a seat cushion, may make them inaccessible when they are most needed.

If you can't always wear your life jacket, you should at least wear it in critical times such as during rough water, bad weather, night passages, and always in cold-weather boating situations.

## **2. Know the Depth of the Water**

It's not the grounding that hurts you, it's the sudden stop! Many times, grounding leaves you high on a sandbar, but still in the water. Too many boaters are eager to power their boat off the bottom. Don't do it until you've checked below to make sure the bilge is not filling with water through a crack in the hull. It's better to be safely aground than sinking.

## **3. Don't Fall Overboard.**

If you hit your head on the way out of the boat and knock yourself unconscious, you won't float face up. Always wear a life jacket. Of particular danger to solo boaters who fall overboard is that their vessel is likely to continue to power on until it runs out of gas, which means it could be too far away to re-board. And some boats turn in a hard circle, surrounding you in wakes and threatening to run you down.

Wear an emergency cut-off switch lanyard so that if you are tossed from the helm, the boat will stop, and you can get back aboard.

A Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) is also a good idea, so that if you should be separated from your boat, rescuers can still locate you.

## **4. Watch the Weather**

Check on weather conditions before departing the dock. Your VHF radio will also give NOAA forecasts. Keeping an eye on the weather is important as our weather can change quickly, particularly in the summer. Poor visibility and high seas — even lightning or waterspouts — are among the risks boaters face if they ignore weather reports and don't watch the horizon.

## **5. Have the Proper Safety Gear**

Too many boaters don't pay attention to the safety gear on their boat. Often, they'll depart without the proper number and sizes of life jackets. Make sure your life jackets fit and are properly adjusted for the people who will be wearing them.

Don't leave port without working flares, properly functioning running lights or horn, or alternative propulsion such as a canoe paddle (required in some locations).

Boaters often overlook the safety value of anchors as well, thinking they are needed only for rare occasions. But your anchor is the first line of defense in a breakdown or storm! It keeps your boat safely in place should the engine fail, especially in a strong tidal current.

America's Boating Club-Marco Island certified Vessel Safety Inspectors can perform a free vessel safety check on your boat.

## **6. Maintain a Lookout**

When there is a collision in boating, the reason usually given is, "I didn't see them coming." But it's your job to see them coming. Whether at anchor or at speed, maintaining a lookout is mandatory for safe boating. And be alert for semi-submerged objects, including crab trap buoys around here, as well as boaters making sudden course or speed changes when seeing wildlife such as dolphins or manatees.

## **7. Avoid Mechanical Issues**

According to U.S. Coast Guard statistics, many serious accidents occur due to mechanical failure. A faulty battery could mean the boat won't start, and if that happens at night, the lights won't work either. So, your boat is stranded, helpless, and practically invisible.

Be sure to keep a watch on your instruments to check battery voltage; it should reflect no less than 12 volts. And be particularly careful to monitor battery levels when using the stereo or other 12-volt equipment on board.

As a backup, carry a flashlight on board as a signal light, and definitely make sure your safety kit includes the required flares to signal distress and mark your position.

## **8. Have Plenty of Fuel**

On the water, you can often call one of the towing companies and they will bring you enough fuel to get you back to port for a fair price. However, if run out of fuel in the middle of the Gulf, the situation can fast become dangerous! In the Gulf, unless you have an EPIRB or satellite phone, or unless someone is in range of your VHF, you could be stranded indefinitely.

How can this happen, you ask? Well, you can miscalculate your return bearing and find yourself far from the inlet and far beyond your fuel range. Or, you may have to skirt an unexpected storm.

So, before you leave the dock, calculate the fuel you think you'll need to go out, play or fish, and return safely to port – 1/3 to go out, 1/3 back, and 1/3 as a safety margin.

## **9. Prevent Sinking**

Inspect your boat's bilge before departing; make sure the bilge pump is working properly and the drain plug is in place. It's also recommended that you keep onboard some soft wood bung plugs (tapered pegs you can pound into a broken through-hull to stop the water).

## **10. Prevent Catching Fire**

Always sniff the bilge for stray fuel fumes before departing. Look for signs of leakage like obvious fuel or a rainbow-like slick on bilge water. And never start an inboard marine engine without running the bilge blower at least four minutes!

Make sure you have the proper fire extinguishers on board for fuel or electrical fires, and make sure they remain charged from season to season. Be sure to have them inspected by America's Boating Club-Marco Island, or replace them if the charge gauge reads red.

## **11. Maintain Safe Speeds for the Conditions - Especially at Night**

One of the chief causes of boating accidents is failing to maintain a safe speed for the conditions. At night, you can't always trust your senses to determine whether the way is clear. For example, another boat's lights may have failed, creating a navigation hazard. The rules don't forgive boaters who fail to travel at a reasonably safe speed for the conditions -- especially at night.

To schedule a free Vessel Safety Check and learn more to improve your safety awareness and boating skills, please go to [marcoboatingclub.org](http://marcoboatingclub.org)

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