

Your Guide to Personal Watercraft Safety

One of the fastest growing American pastimes is recreational boating.

Learn About PWC Safety

While many boaters cruise in sailboats and powerboats, personal watercraft (PWC) have become a popular way to enjoy the water. Recreational boaters use them as tenders on larger boats, to water ski, to commute and for just plain fun.

These pages will acquaint you with some of the information you should know before leaving the shore. For your own safety and the safety of others, we encourage you to learn more.

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Federal and State Regulations

While personal watercraft are often skippered by teens and young adults, they are not toys. They are classified by the U.S. Coast Guard as Class A inboard boats (boats less than 16' in length). Both the craft and its operator must comply with all Federal and state requirements.

Federal regulations require that personal watercraft be registered and have an identification number. The validation sticker

and registration number must be displayed on the craft.

State regulations vary, but may require the operator to be of a minimum age (usually 14 to 16 years old), complete a safe boating course and/or obtain an operator's certificate. States and local jurisdictions may also regulate speed limits, hours and areas of operation.

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Safety Equipment

All Class A inboard craft must carry the following items:

- Coast Guard-approved personal flotation devices (PFDs) for each person aboard. (Type III vests, the most popular among PWC enthusiasts, are not designed to turn unconscious wearers face up, but allow greater freedom than Types I or II)
- Fully charged portable B-1 type fire extinguisher
- Efficient sound-producing device (whistle or horn) for signaling or warning

In addition, the following items are strongly recommended to carry or wear aboard the craft:

- PWC owner's manual
- Boating safety course certificate
- Local chart
- Small waterproof first-aid kit
- Emergency repair supplies—basic tools, spare lanyard, strong tape, spare spark plugs, oil, spray lubricant and cleaner
- Visual distress signal (flare, brightly colored cloth or flag, signaling mirror)
- Tow rope
- Plastic one gallon fuel can
- Telescoping oar
- Anchor
- Sunscreen with UV protection
- Wet suit for water below 70°—Neoprene pants for warmer water
- Helmet (required for racing)—A high percentage of injuries are head injuries
- Sunglasses or goggles
- Nonskid shoes or boots (for example, neoprene "wet-booties") Gloves
- Waterproof watch

Trailer Safety

When purchasing a trailer, stay within recommended capacity guidelines. When determining capacity, include the weight of fuel and accessories in addition to the weight of the craft.

Trailers come with closed or open frames. Closed frames help protect the wiring, but problems can be difficult to locate and repair. Open frames leave the wiring exposed, but make it easier to spot and repair potential problems. Open frames also

drain water more easily and efficiently.

Consider the method of PWC support, the frame strength and construction, whether lights and wiring are approved for marine use, whether rollers and bunks are properly positioned and attached to the main frame for proper suspension, and the durability of the finish. (Powder-coated or galvanized finishes are more durable than baked-on enamel.)

Purchase good quality tie-downs with the right type of hooks to use with your trailer

Inspect your trailer carefully before each use. Check:

- Tires for wear and inflation
- Hitch and safety chain for signs of wear or stress
- Braking system to make sure you can stop with a load
- Electrical system for improper connections, corroded terminals, damaged wires, burned out bulbs, etc.
- Wheel bearings are properly packed with a good bearing grease
- Lug nuts and main nuts are tight
- Stops, rollers and bunks for wear or cracks
- Coupler and ball are compatible in size and are properly secured. Check for wear or stress
- Both bow and stern of your PWC are secured to the trailer. Use extra tie-downs in case one should fail
- Emergency supplies; carry basic tools, spare bulbs, bearings, grease, mounted tire and highway flares

Drive carefully. Give other drivers plenty of warning for any maneuvers. Allow for the extra length of the car and trailer when turning and passing. Allow extra time for stopping.

Pull off the road periodically to check the rig. Examine the tires and wheel bearings for signs of overheating, check the lights and test the tie-downs.

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Before Leaving Home



- Study your owner's manual to learn all you can about your PWC.
- Inspect your craft and make necessary repairs.

Check

- Steering controls are operating properly
- For hull damage
- Throttle works freely and returns to idle position when released

- Hoses, hose connections and clamps
- Battery and cable connections
- For fuel and oil leaks
- For adequate fuel and oil levels—the jump pump cover and inlet grate for looseness
- Engine cover latches are secure

Check that all safety equipment is aboard and in proper working order.

File a float plan with a close neighbor or friend. Instruct them to alert the Coast Guard or local Search and Rescue agency if you do not arrive home when expected.

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Before Leaving Shore

At the Launch Ramp:

- It helps to have someone in the car, and someone at the water.
- Prepare your PWC as much as possible before taking your turn in line. Remove the craft cover. Remove the seat for a few minutes to allow gas fumes to vent. Undo the stern (not bow) tie-downs. Unplug the trailer lights. Make sure the PWC drain plugs are in place. Visually inspect your PWC from bow to stern.
- Be courteous. Wait your turn at the ramp. Don't rush, but don't linger longer than necessary.
- Make sure the way is clear before launching. Look for other craft, debris, etc.
- Be prepared to ride clear of the launch area immediately and to secure the PWC out of the way of others.
- Never leave the trailer unattended on the ramp with only the parking brake set.

In the Water

- Make sure you and your riders are wearing the proper gear, including PFDs. Most PWC operators who drown are not wearing a PFD.
- Attach the kill switch safety lanyard to your PFD or wrist. If you fall off, the PWC will come to a stop.
- Before starting the engine, check that the throttle control and handlebars are operating smoothly, and that the steering nozzle turns properly in both directions.
- The engine should be started in at least three feet of water to avoid stirring up the ground or damaging the jet pump. Run your engine for several seconds to get the water out.
- Maintain idle speed for at least 100 yards from shore and until you're in a clear area.

Practice before taking off:



- Make sure that you and your riders are familiar with the PWC. If you or a rider are operating a particular craft for the first time, practice in an area that is clear of other craft and obstacles before venturing off into deeper water.
- Start slowly. The engine will run at idle if there is no pressure on the throttle, and the craft will normally move forward at several miles per hour. To increase speed, gently squeeze the throttle.
- Turn in different directions, and at different speeds. Practice shifting your weight as you turn, as when riding a bicycle. PWC models vary in how they respond to rider position.
- Practice coming to a stop at a low speed to see how the craft behaves. Notice that without power you can't steer. In addition, notice that the craft does not come to an immediate stop. PWC (like other boats) have no brakes - when you turn off the engine, the distance the craft travels before coming to a complete stop depends on hull design, the original speed, water conditions, and total craft weight, including everyone and everything aboard.
- Make sure that you and your rider are completely comfortable with maneuvering the craft before increasing speed and traveling further offshore.

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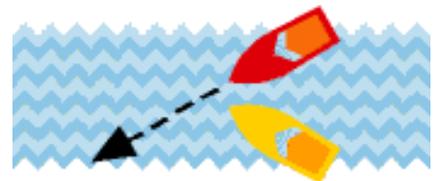
Rules of the Water

You are required to know and obey the boating Rules of the Water (also known as Navigation Rules). The rules can be quite complex, and a boating safety course is highly recommended (if not required). The following are a few simple guidelines for common encounters with other craft.

Non-powered craft (including sailboats under sail), commercial and fishing vessels have the right of way.



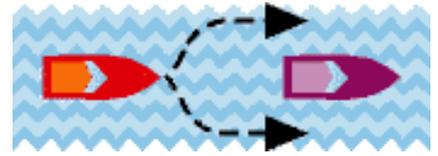
When crossing paths with another craft (with the exception of those mentioned above), the boat on the right has the right of way. If necessary, slow down to let the boat on your right continue its course, then pass behind it.



When meeting another craft head on, stay to the right so that the other boat passes to your left.



When passing another craft, the boat being overtaken has the right of way. You may pass on either side, but stay well clear of the other boat.



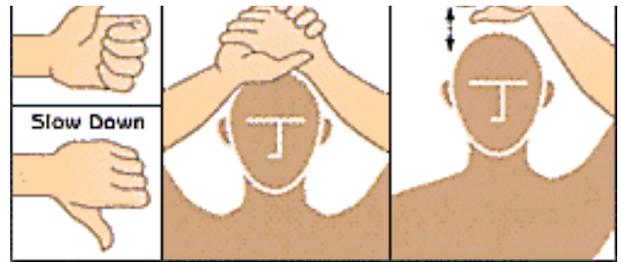
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Cruising Safely and Considerately

Be Safe

- Know the load limits for your PWC. Never carry more weight or riders than specified in your manual. (A skier counts as a rider.)
- Never allow a person who does not meet your state's licensing requirements to operate your PWC.
- Study the local navigation chart beforehand. Know the location of hazards such as rocks, buoys, sandbars and submerged objects, such as pilings.
- If possible, travel with another PWC. Maintain a safe distance while moving.
- If possible, stay within sight of the shore.
- Obey local regulations. Stay clear of areas designated "off-limits" to PWC. Obey posted speed limits.
- When traveling, follow the markers. Red and green buoys or daymarks are used to mark navigable channels. If you are returning from the ocean to a port, red markers with even numbers should be on your right; green markers with odd numbers should be on your left. Remember the slogan "Red – Right – Returning."
- Approach objects, such as a dock or a boat, at an angle, not head on. The momentum of a PWC continues even after the engine is turned off. An angle approach can help prevent a collision if the craft does not come to a complete stop in time.
- To avoid obstacles, keep your power on and turn. The water jet powers and steers the PWC; if you don't have power, you can't steer. (A study of PWC accidents by the National Transportation Safety Board highlights the problems of operator control during off-throttle steering situations. Get the National Transportation Safety Board Study. Never follow directly behind another PWC. If leading a group of PWCs, keep a careful lookout using a rearview mirror. Avoid sudden turns that may cross the direction of travel of those following you.
- Don't jump the wake of a passing boat. You could misjudge its speed and hit it. In addition, you might not see traffic on the other side of the boat.
- Never operate a PWC at night. PWC have no running lights, which are required for craft traveling at night. A three-member team is required when pulling a water skier—the driver, observer and skier. Learn the communication signals between skier and craft (right). Turn off the power when assisting a skier back onto your PWC.





Be Alert.

- Stay constantly alert for other craft, swimmers, divers, water skiers and people fishing. Keep clear.
- Be on the lookout for adverse weather conditions—darkening skies, rain, fog, increasing winds. Reduce speed and head toward shore at the first sign of change.
- Keep an eye on your fuel gauge. Leave enough fuel to return home.
- Be aware of the time. Leave enough time to return home before dark.
- A day on the water can take a toll on the body. Know the symptoms of boater's fatigue and hypothermia. Head to shore at the first sign of physical impairment.
- Boater's fatigue: Staring straight ahead, loss of awareness, slowed reaction time.
- Hypothermia: Shivering, bluish lips or fingernails, confusion or dizziness, poor coordination, impaired vision, weak pulse.

Be Considerate

- Stay clear of marinas or port entrances, anchorages or areas of heavy boat traffic.
- Don't stay in one location for long periods of time. Continuous noise is a common complaint about PWC.
- Don't operate your PWC early in the morning or late in the evening.
- Don't operate in swimming or fishing areas.
- Don't create wakes near other individuals or boats, or near the shore where they can cause damage to beaches and property. You are responsible for any damage caused by your wake.
- Don't spray people on the shore.
- Respect the environment. Don't spill fuel or oil. Don't litter.
- Respect the wildlife. Stay clear of marine animals and conservation areas.

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Returning to Shore

- Slow down and maintain idle speed, beginning at least 100 yards from the breakwater, dock or shore.
- If landing at a dock, approach at an angle, not head on.
- If landing ashore, shut off the engine in water at least three feet deep. Be prepared to get off and maneuver the PWC to land. Do not run your craft aground or you may damage the jet pump.

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Emergency Situations

A capsized PWC may take on water, but it is designed not to sink.

- If you fall from a moving craft, hit the water rear end first, with legs together and arms over the head. The safety lanyard, attached to your wrist or life vest, should kill the engine. A running engine can damage the craft and cause injury to you. (If you become separated from the craft and the engine is still running, pull the lanyard off immediately.)
- Exercise caution when righting a craft to avoid injury. Roll the craft over in a clockwise direction to prevent water from the exhaust system from entering the engine.
- In the event of a serious emergency, or if you are injured, stay with the PWC until help arrives. Use your whistle, visual distress signal and/or mirror to attract attention.
- If you carry a handheld combination GPS/VHF unit, you will be able to call for help and provide your exact location.

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Reporting An Accident

The following accidents must be reported by the owner or operator of the craft to the proper marine law enforcement authority in the state or location in which the accident occurred.

- Immediate notification in the event of a death or disappearance.
- A formal report must be filed within 48 hours if a person dies, or there are injuries requiring more than first aid.
- A formal report must be filed within 10 days for accidents involving more than \$500 damage, or resulting in the complete loss of a vessel

Be prepared to provide the date, time and location of the accident; the name of the person who was injured, died or disappeared; the craft name and/or number; the name(s) and address(es) of the craft owner and operator.

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Security

A few simple precautions can help protect your PWC from theft.

- Never leave the keys in the ignition.
- Never leave your PWC unattended at docks or on beaches.
- If in a group on shore, chain your PWC to others. (Chaining PWC to others in the water can scratch the hulls.)
- Permanently affix your Hull Identification Number (HIN) in a secret, unexposed location.
- Record the number and keep it in a safe place. It may help to identify your PWC if it is stolen.

If On a Trailer:

- Lock your PWC to the trailer
- Add a hitch lock so the trailer can't be easily towed away.
- Remove a trailer wheel and store it in the trunk of your car.

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Substance Abuse

Over half of boating-related deaths involve the use of alcohol or drugs. Normal behavior can be affected by exposure to fresh air, ultraviolet light, glare, motion and noise: adding alcohol or drugs can result in an extremely explosive situation.

Alcohol and drugs affect the body in areas that are critical to the safe operation of a watercraft. Effects include:

- decreased balance
- decreased coordination
- decreased reaction time
- decreased judgment; loss of inhibitions
- decreased vision; fuzzy or double vision; reduced peripheral vision

A BUI (Boating Under the Influence) conviction can result in a fine, imprisonment, or both. In addition, some states will revoke your driver's license if you are apprehended for boating while intoxicated.

Play it safe. Never operate or ride on a watercraft while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

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Safe Boating Courses

Take a safe boating course through the Coast Guard Auxiliary or U.S. Power Squadrons. The classes are free or involve a nominal fee to cover the cost of materials. Call the "Boating CourseLine" at 1-800-336-2628 for information about a class near you.

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