

Life Jackets for Children and Teens

When should my child wear a life jacket?

Children and teens should wear a life jacket any time they are on a boat, raft, inner tube or swimming in open water like lakes, rivers or the ocean.

Children birth to 5 years old should also wear a life jacket while in or near water. This includes while they are on a beach or dock.

Children between the ages of 6 and 11 should also wear a life jacket while on docks and river banks.

My child knows how to swim. Is a life jacket still needed?

Yes, if you or your child or teen are in a boat or swimming in open water that is outside of a life-guarded area, wear a life jacket.

Why?

Unlike the calm waters of a pool, open water can have dangers such as cold temperature, currents, rapid changes in depth, weeds and grasses or jagged rocks. If you capsize in a boat, there's no time to put on a life jacket. There may be no place for a cold, tired or panicked swimmer to rest. These dangers are a real threat to even the best swimmers.

Do parents need to wear life jackets?

Yes, adults need to be ready to rescue a child who goes into the water. Each year, parents drown trying to rescue their children. Also, adults are the best role model for wearing life jackets. It is more likely that your child will wear one if you do.



Types of life jackets

Life jackets are also called life vests, personal floatation devices or PFDs. There are different types of life jackets. Type II and III jackets work best for near-shore boating and other water activities. Both types come in sizes to fit people from small children to adults.

Type II jackets are good for new swimmers and people who cannot swim. They come in smaller sizes with neck collars to help keep a child's face out of the water.

Type III jackets are good for children and teens who are at ease in the water and want more comfort and freedom to move.

Swimsuits with built-in life jackets

Check the label on this type of suit, since some are not U.S. Coast Guard-approved. When any part of this type of suit fades to the color of the inside label, it must be replaced because it no longer meets the Coast Guard strength requirement.

Buying a life jacket

Even if you don't own a boat, buy life jackets for yourself and your child. Carry them in your car during the summer. That way, you will have one that fits each of you in case there aren't any to rent or borrow when you are near the water or going out on a boat.

- Check that the life jackets are U.S. Coast Guard–approved.
- Check for a good fit. Life jackets go by size and weight of your child.
- When the life jacket is fastened, it should be snug, yet comfortable. Lift your child by the shoulders of the jacket; your child's chin and ears should not slip through if it fits well.
- For younger children, choose a jacket with both a collar for head support and a strap between the legs.
- How a life jacket looks and its color really matter to older kids and teens. Have your child or teen help you find a jacket that appeals to them.

What else do I need to know?

- Fasten all straps, zippers and ties for best protection.
- Check jackets each year for fit, wear and tear. Throw them away if you find air leakage, mildew or rot.
- If a child were to panic in the water and thrash about, they may turn onto their face. Take time with your child to practice wearing a life jacket and leaning back in the water.

- As your child grows, make sure the life jacket fits and appeals to them.
- Never make changes to a life jacket, like taking off or adding parts. It will not be as safe if you do.
- Water wings, rafts or plastic rings are not designed to keep swimmers safe. Never use them in place of a life jacket.
- Life jackets that self-inflate are an option for adults or teens that are at least 16 years old.

Remember, life jackets only work when they are worn, and do not take the place of adult supervision.

To Learn More

- **Children's drowning prevention and water safety information at www.seattlechildrens.org/dp**
- **Your child's healthcare provider**

Seattle Children's will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call Marketing Communications at 206-987-5205 or 206-987-2280 (TTY).

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children's. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's healthcare provider.

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