

As we move into May, we can all feel that summer lies just ahead of us. For many, that means time spent with family and friends on the water. We all want to enjoy ourselves during our day at the lake and that means avoiding accidents and keeping safety a top priority. Fortunately, we can look to the US Coast Guard for good information on staying safe on the water.

So, how can we avoid boating accidents? According to the 2017 US Coast Guard Recreational Boating Statics report, the most frequent contributing factor found in boating accidents is operator inattention. Operating a watercraft is both a great experience and a serious responsibility. Operating a watercraft on open water provides freedom of movement and enhanced recreational opportunities unlike those on the land or public roadways. Fewer restrictions on movement, the unpredictability of other operators, and presence of navigational hazards all require an operator's full attention be devoted to driving. Operators must focus on both controlling their watercraft and ensuring that they maintain a safe distance from other craft and people using the water. Be alert while at the helm!

What causes most boating fatalities? The Coast Guard report cited alcohol use as the most frequent contributing factor found in watercraft fatalities. Watercraft lack many of the safety features available in automobiles, meaning those on board are much more depending upon the operator to keep them safe. Operating a watercraft while intoxicated is a crime and will markedly increase your risk of being involved in a life-ending crash. Operators must be sober, sharp, and alert in order to avoid tragedy.

What is the most important piece of safety equipment on the water? According to the US Coast Guard 2017 report, 68% of all deaths on the water were a result of drowning. The same report indicated that 82% of drowning victims were not wearing a life jacket. Wearing a life jacket is the simplest and most important thing anyone on the water can do to ensure their safety. Minnesota law requires anyone under 10 years of age to wear a properly fitted life jacket. Minnesota law also requires that there be a readily accessible and wearable life jacket for each person onboard a boat. Floating seat cushions do not count as wearable life jackets, however they do meet the requirements of a throwable flotation device required for boats 16 feet and longer. Having a life jacket onboard does little good unless it is being worn. Accidents can happen in the blink of eye, without the time or warning needed to put on a life jacket. Properly fitted and worn lifejackets will allow even unconscious victims in the water their best opportunity to survive an accident as the lifejacket keeps the person afloat for rescuers. Lifejackets have come a long way in terms of comfort since the days of the bright orange horseshoe vest. Lightweight and comfortable options abound for those going out on the water and they should be worn while out on the water.

The Minnesota DNR publishes the Minnesota Boating Guide and has a web page devoted to boat and water safety at, <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/safety/boatwater/index.html>. Both of these resources provide much more information to help you stay safe on the water. Check out these sources for more information and be safe on the water this year!

For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.