

INFLATABLE PFDs

This response was prepared for US SAILING by Ron Trossbach to answer the question 'What inflatable should I buy?' It also serves as a reminder to review our personal life jacket situation as we go out on the water this spring.

INFLATABLE BELT PACK PFDs. Commonly called "Fanny Packs" because people rotate them behind their backs. They come in two different versions for day/inland use and for offshore use. The main difference is buoyancy, 22.5 vs. 32 lbs. Belt pack PFDs are recommended only for adults who are good swimmers because after a person falls into the water they must be rotated to the front of the body, manually inflated by pulling a ripcord and then pulled over the head. This is no small feat. I recommend that people try this before they buy one by orally inflating a borrowed belt pack and trying to pull it over their head, while out of the water. I have trouble doing this because of a weak shoulder, for example, so I prefer a vest.

INFLATABLE LIFE VESTS. There is a wide selection of this type of PFD. Basically there are three decisions to make when choosing one:

- Inshore or Offshore. The difference is buoyancy (22-40 lbs) and strength of the materials used. The Offshore models are a bit more bulky but are designed to float an unconscious person face up at an angle of 45 degrees to the water.
- Manual or Automatic Inflation. The newer hydrostatic inflation systems are working much better with few premature inflation incidents but they are more expensive and require additional maintenance.
- Integrated with Safety Harness. These vests can be attached to a tether/safety line to keep the person from falling overboard. This is particularly desirable in any rough weather, not just offshore.

Most of these vests are now being designed for comfort, so it is important to try them on to evaluate how they feel. It is especially important that women try them on for comfortable fit and that children have PFDs rated for their size/weight so they will not slip out of them. Once you find one that is comfortable you won't mind wearing it in all situations. If it is uncomfortable, you will find reasons not to put it on.

ACCESSORIES AND MARKING. Every PFD should have a whistle. If there is a remote chance that you will be out at night it should also have a light. All PFDs should be marked with either the wearer's or the boat's name. Markings should not be made on the buoyancy chambers or their covers since the chemical reaction of any ink/paint could affect the ability to hold air/gas or the strength of the cover. It is not uncommon for an inflatable PFD to have crotch or thigh straps, a signal mirror, a pencil or laser flare, a combination strobe/incandescent light, dye, repellent, a PLB and a spray hood. Any or all of these items add to the bulk and weight of the vest, so it is a personal tradeoff. All of these devices should be tied to the vest straps close enough for the wearer to reach them easily while in the water.

TRAINING. It is extremely important that each person wearing a PFD know how to operate it and use all of the gear that it contains. There are many stories where failure to do this has almost been disastrous. In a recent case the person in the water did not know he had a whistle and could not turn on his PFD light so a boat passed him close by unnoticed. Fortunately, he had a waterproof VHF that he used to call for USCG rescue.

MAINTENANCE. Each inflatable PFD should be orally inflated once a year and left overnight to test for leaks. Additional service, including replacement of some inflators should be done at regular intervals following the instructions that come with each device. Annual replacement of the inflator bobbin will help reduce premature inflation in the older style automatic, self inflating PFDs. Care should be taken to wipe inflatable PFDs after wearing and to store them in a dry place.