ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH & SAFETY
UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON

PERSONAL FLOTATION DEVICES

Washington State Department of Labor & Industries requires that all employees be protected from drowning. In work areas where the danger of drowning cannot be mitigated by engineering or other workplace safety measures (e.g., guardrails), the University of Washington is required to provide and ensure personnel wear Personal Flotation Devices (PFDs). The requirements found in this focus sheet apply to all University personnel, students and volunteers engaged in University research, teaching, or operational activities.

SUPERVISOR'S ROLE

Supervisors are required to evaluate working conditions and activities to:

1. Determine if a drowning hazard exists;
2. Determine whether wearing a PFD is required;
3. Identify and implement safety measures (controls) to prevent drowning;
4. Document hazards and controls in a risk assessment or fieldwork safety plan (as appropriate); and
5. Train personnel, students, and volunteers to identify and mitigate drowning hazards.

Personnel, students, and volunteers working around water must be trained for the environmental hazards they may encounter, for example swimming or immersion survival in cold water.

IDENTIFY POTENTIAL DROWNING HAZARDS

Review the practices and conditions of any work that is being conducted on, above, or alongside water to identify hazards that might contribute to drowning. Consider:

- Is work taking place on, above, or alongside water where there is a risk of drowning?
- Are there tripping hazards, such as uneven surfaces, boat/dock movement, etc.?
- Are safety briefings being provided to identify and discuss potential drowning hazards?
- Are individuals wearing PFDs correctly?
- If wearing an inflatable PFD, will it automatically inflate upon immersion?

PFDs ARE REQUIRED TO BE WORN WHEN:

> Working over or alongside water that personnel could fall into and risk drowning

> There are no physical barriers to prevent accidental falls into water

> Working aboard any watercraft (motorized, paddlecraft, or sailboat)

> Entering the water to perform work tasks other than SCUBA (e.g., snorkeling and wading)

> In close proximity to a water hazard when there are obstructions, slipping or tripping hazards, hazardous environmental conditions, loads being carried, or other task-related distractions

> Controls are not in place to effectively reduce the risk of drowning

View the Are You Required to Wear a Personal Flotation Device? flowchart to determine whether you are required to wear a PFD.

SAFETY MEASURES (CONTROLS)

Determine if the use of PFDs and other control measures can effectively reduce the risk of drowning.

Implementing other types of effective controls may reduce the risk of drowning low enough that a PFD is no longer required. Examples include working behind a guardrail or wearing an approved safety belt with a lifeline that prevents an accidental fall into the water (refer to the Fall Protection Manual).

PFDs ARE *NOT* REQUIRED WHEN:

> Working inside an operating cab or structure that eliminates the possibility of falling into the water (boat cabin, dock building, etc.)

> Working behind standard height and strength guardrails (Fall Protection Manual)

> Fully suited up in SCUBA equipment

> Lifeguarding at a Water Recreation Facility

> Performing in-water activities at a Water Recreation Facility while being monitored by a lifeguard or similarly qualified individual (WAC 246-260-131)

WHAT IS A PERSONAL FLOTATION DEVICE?

Personal flotation devices (PFDs) are personal protective equipment that provide buoyancy for a person immersed in water to improve their ability to maintain an open airway and reduce the risk of drowning. There are a variety of PFD styles to choose from, depending on the type of work being done, the weather, work conditions, and the amount/type of buoyancy needed to ensure adequate flotation.
All PFDs must be approved by the United States Coast Guard (USCG) for use on commercial or merchant vessels and be used in accordance with their intended and approved use.

TYPES OF PFDs

There are currently **two labeling systems** for PFDs in the United States. The legacy system identifies four types of wearable PFDs. The newer (as of 2021) **Performance Classification System** (described below) distinguishes PFDs based upon their intended use and will eventually replace the legacy system.

The **legacy labeling system** identifies four types of wearable PFDs:

- Type I: *Off-Shore Life Jacket* - effective for all waters or where rescue may be delayed.
- Type II: *Near-Shore Buoyant Vest* - intended for calm, inland water or where there is a good chance of quick rescue.
- Type III: *Flotation Aid* - good for calm, inland water, or where there is a good chance of rescue.
- Type V: Special use flotation aids such work vests, inflatable PFDs and deck suits marked for commercial use.

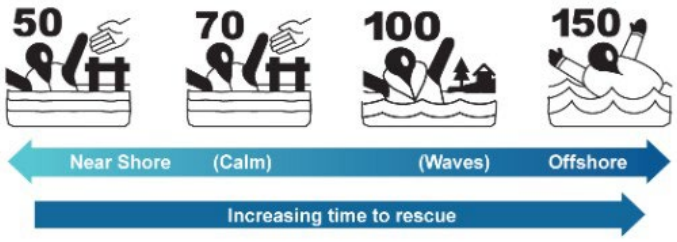
Inflatable PFDs may be suitable for a particular work environment. Supervisors may choose to allow personnel to wear inflatable PFDs if they are:

- USCG approved for commercial work;
- Used in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions;
- Not used while performing any kind of hot work; and
- Inspected annually to ensure the continued integrity of the inflation bladder.

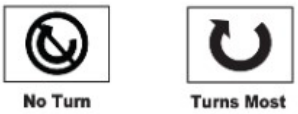
The **Performance Classification System** aims to harmonize PFD labels between the United States, Canada, and Europe by using icons to convey important information on a label including:

- Performance, buoyancy and turning ability
- Intended activity and limitations of use

The first set of graphics state the Newtons of buoyancy that the PFD provides as well as the wearer's general proximity to shore or assistance:



The following graphics indicate whether the PFD will turn most wearers face up if they are motionless:



The final four graphics indicate whether the PFD is inappropriate for use aboard a personal watercraft, while waterskiing, while tubing, and for whitewater paddling activities:

Questions? Contact EH&S at (206) 685-5031 or divesafe@uw.edu.