



Operating Your Personal Watercraft Safely

Since 1990, usage of personal watercraft (PWC) in the U.S., such as jetskis, has increased by 400 percent.¹ While owning a personal watercraft can be a fun way to enjoy the water, it's also a dangerous pastime if you fail to operate your craft with safety in mind. A personal watercraft is governed by the same rules and regulations as a powerboat with some added rules that should be followed at all times.

Factors such as inexperience, excessive speed and careless practices are the predominant causes of accidents among operators. In 1997, 24% of accidents involving injury were attributed to individuals who rented PWCs. These individuals typically received less than one hour of operating instruction.² Owners of PWCs usually have enough instruction and experience themselves, but not necessarily those borrowing their craft.

PWCs are extremely fast with some models reaching top speeds of 70-mph. As a result many accidents are speed related.³

If you are approaching the shore or a dock at a high rate of speed and you shut off the engine you'll lose the ability to steer. This can cause 'off-throttle' steering accidents. Operators should always exercise caution with regard to speed and maneuverability.

Collisions with other boats and docks also account for many accidents. When they are close to other boats some PWC operators attempt to jump the wake created by another boat. It is important to follow rules concerning 'no wake zones,' which are usually within 100 feet of the shoreline.⁵

Some additional safety measures include the following:

- Make sure your watercraft is equipped with a lanyard switch (often called a kill switch). The lanyard is attached to your wrist and to the start/stop switch. In the event you are thrown from the vessel the engine will stop and lessen the likelihood of becoming a hazard to others.⁶ In most states these switches are now mandatory.
- Carry a Coast Guard approved fire extinguisher on board.⁷
- Always wear personal flotation devices. This includes the driver and all passengers.
- Protective eyewear, footwear and a wetsuit should be worn at all times.

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- Obey rules that dictate the age of the operator and the time of day when you are allowed to operate your PWC.

Because of the increased popularity of PWCs lawmakers are showing a greater interest in regulating the use of these pleasure crafts. It is a good idea to check the laws governing your particular area of operation as rules vary from state to state.

If operators are responsible and vigilant then all who participate can enjoy this fun and popular form of boating. It is important to know the rules before you hit the water.

1. United States Coast Guard. PWC accident statistics: 1987 - 1996. (On-line) 1998. Available from URL.
<http://www.uscgboating.org/>
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3. National Transportation Safety Board. Personal watercraft safety. Safety Study NTSB/SS - 98/01. Washington (DC) 1998
Hamman BL, Miller FB, Fallat ME, Richardson JD. Injuries resulting from motorized personal watercraft. J Pediatr Surg 1993;
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4. Jones CS. Children and personal watercraft: injury characteristics and potential countermeasures. Injury Prevention 1998; 4(1):
61-62.
5. BoatSafe.com: boatsafe.com/nauticalknowhow/boating/7_6.htm.
6. Commander Bob's: commanderbob.com; BoatSafe.com: boatsafe.com/nauticalknowhow/boating/7_6.htm.
7. BoatSafe.com: boatsafe.com/nauticalknowhow/boating/7_6.htm.

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