The Foundation’s approach to testing began with fitting a life jacket on a tester while out of the water. Most jackets were simple to wear and heavy after getting out of the water. The Type III jacket and the ability to repack around your waist, but is positioned in the front. Some inflatable life jackets were difficult to swim in, but all turned our testers face up, as designed - adding peace of mind, especially if waiting for a rescue. If nearshore boating is more your style and you’ll be taking the jacket and all of its accessories with you, you might consider wearing routinely while boating.

The best choice if you venture offshore for days at a time. It floated our tester high and provided a great sense of security, especially if waiting for a rescue. If nearshore boating is more your style and you’ll be taking the jacket and all of its accessories with you, you might consider wearing routinely while boating.

### Inflatable Life Jackets

Inflatable life jackets come in two basic styles, suspender-style and belt packs. The suspender-style fits over your shoulders and clips in the front and the belt pack, which is worn like a fanny pack around your waist, but is positioned in the front. Some inflatable life jackets have an auto-inflate feature that activates when submerged in water. All inflatable life jackets have a manual-inflate pull cord mechanism and an oral inflation tube. We tested three suspender-style inflatable life jackets; however there are many others on the market.

### Spindock Deck Vest

The most complex of the inflatables, the 150N Spindock Deck Vest features an integral sailing harness and leg straps. It also has a line cutter to free you from entanglement, a spray hood to prevent the ingestion of water, and a strobe light to be spotted from a distance. Because of all the extra features, including the auto-inflate mechanism, the jacket was heavier and considerably harder to don and to adjust than the others. The Spindock Deck Vest acts like a life boat for your head with a full head covering for heavy seas.

### Baltic Winner

A more basic version of the European-rated jacket was the 150N Baltic Winner. The substantially lower price is partly a result of the manual inflation (an auto-inflation version is available) and simple design relative to that of the Deckvest. The Winner has a catch strap that proved beneficial in keeping the jacket from riding up. The Winner relies on a zipper that separates upon inflation, and in theory, makes the unit easier to repack. However, testers discovered that the zipper sometimes came apart when it wasn’t supposed to.

### Mustang Auto Deluxe

The Mustang Auto Deluxe is the mid-priced jacket in this category, and was a “Staff Pick” because of its all around simplicity for an inflatable life jacket and the ability to repack easily, in part because of the Velcro closure mechanism. The performance was similar to the other two inflatable jackets, but testers noted this jacket was initially tight around the neck after inflation and they had to let some air out through the oral inflation tube to improve comfort. The Mustang was the only non-Coast Guard-approved inflatable life jacket tested in this category, although there are several other manufacturers that make Coast Guard-approved inflatable life jackets.

Before making a purchase in this category, you should consider what type of boating you do. Testers felt the Deckvest was the best choice if you venture offshore for days at a time. It floated our tester high and provided a great sense of security, especially if waiting for a rescue. If nearshore boating is more your style and you’ll be taking the jacket and all of its accessories with you, you might consider wearing routinely while boating.

Paddlesport Jackets

Four Paddlesport Life Jackets

Paddlers expect a lot from their gear and active performance characteristics rank high on their list of requirements. Paddlesport jackets are designed with large arm openings to allow for a great range of motion. Some paddlers spend the majority of their time seated, paddlesports jackets also tend to have short torsos so they don’t bunch up in the neck and are positioned in the front. Some inflatable life jackets were difficult to swim in, but all turned our testers face up, as designed - adding peace of mind, especially if waiting for a rescue. If nearshore boating is more your style and you’ll be taking the jacket and all of its accessories with you, you might consider wearing routinely while boating.

West Marine Medalist and Baltic Canoe

Inherently buoyant jackets like the West Marine Medalist tend to be somewhat thicker in the front, back and sides. The CE rated Baltic Canoe was longer in the torso, but had did not have any flotation on the sides. When seated, testers felt it rode up into the neck region, despite having a catch strap. The Medalist was favored over the Canoe since it had a more secure fit. It also was relatively easy to swim in if you capsized and had to swim back to your craft.

Sterns Nova Inflatable

The remaining two paddlesport jackets tested had CO2 canisters to provide the required Coast Guard buoyancy. The Sterns Nova inflatable with its many adjustment straps fit snugly on the torso and was a comfortable padding jacket. When inflated, the bladder is the size of a small throw pillow protruding from the front of the jacket. A strap is included so that it can be placed around the back of the neck to hold the inflated bladder in place. With the inflated bladder in the front, testers found it difficult to swim, and its rating is lower as a result.

### Kokatat Hybrid Inflatable

The Kokatat Hybrid inflatable was the most expensive in this class at. Multiple testers found that it fit great and had some initial inherent buoyancy built into the jacket (75s). Its 160 canister when punctured provided additional flotation bringing the total buoyancy up to 22 lbs. This jacket was comfortable to wear un-inflated and was very easy to repack after inflation. Swimming in it was no challenge due to the bulk in the front when inflated, but overall the Kokatat was an all around solid performer with a great fit. It also had a convenient pocket for accessories like

### Control Jackets

When many people hear the term life jacket, the first thing that comes to mind is a bright orange Type II jacket. They’re easily recognizable, and they’re on most people’s boats, but they are rarely worn except in an emergency. The U.S. Coast Guard Type I, Type II and Type III vests meet strict performance requirements (see flotation standards below). The Type I life jacket is intended for offshore use, and will turn an unconscious person face up. The Type II life jacket has similar performance but has less flotation and may not always turn an unconscious person face up. And finally, the Type III life jacket will not turn an unconscious person face up, but is less bulky and is intended for use where a quick rescue is likely.

### Control Jackets: Type I and Type II

The Kent Offshore Type I life jacket and the Kent Neashore Type II life jacket scored low on comfort among our testers. While the Type I was the only inherently buoyant jacket in our study that consistently turned our testers face up, its bulk made it challenging to swim and heavy after getting out of the water. The Type II jacket, while an inexpensive way to meet the Coast Guard requirements for carrying a life jacket aboard, was not comfortable enough to be worn for extended periods of time.

### Control Jackets: Type III

The standard Type III life jacket is popular with the active boaters and tends to be worn the most often than the Type I and Type II jackets. The Kent General Purpose Type III was easier to fit properly that the Type I and II jackets, although one of our testers, a non-boater, initially put the jacket on inside out and another tester misaligned the buckles. The life jacket we tested was an adult universal size, so while adjustable, it was far from a perfect fit in most testers. The Kent General Purpose Type III is the only life jacket in this control category that our testers would consider wearing routinely while boating.
The Spinlock Zero. A water trail map and whistle, which made this a clear “Staff Pick” in this category.

Dinghy Sailing Jackets

Floatation devices for dinghy sailing

In competitive sailing, especially small-boat dinghy regattas, participants are usually required to wear some sort of personal flotation or buoyancy aid. Since sailors often move around the boat, bend at the waist, change sides quickly, and dash below to retrieve sails, a non-buoy life jacket is vital. Buckles can potentially tangle or snag on so a simple jacket with clean lines is important. The European 50N buoyancy aid is common overseas and favored by the small boat crowd in the US. We evaluated five European sailing jackets and compared them to a readily available US Coast Guard-approved jacket. The first thing testers noted, was how snugly the dinghy sailing jackets fit. Some were challenging to put on, but once adjusted, they felt like a second skin. Swimming in these jackets was easy due to the reduced bulk compared to a US Coast Guard-approved Type III jacket. While the chance of going for a swim when dinghy sailing is high, mobility is often key for self-rescuing, in the event assistance is needed, response time is short during organized regattas. Testers in this category appreciated the slightly less flotation in favor of a smaller, but snug fitting life jacket.

Baltic Dinghy Pro

The Baltic Dinghy Pro and the Spinlock Zero were the easiest to put on but were the least snug initially. With some additional adjustment, the Zero fit better, but testers stated these two jackets bunched up behind the neck when seated, which dinghy sailors do a lot. Both of the Gill models - Compressor and Pro Racer, were harder to pull on over the head, but were comfortably snug once adjusted. A test of the Zhik buoyancy aid takes place in a swimming pool. Testers favored the Pro Racer over the Compressor since it stayed in place better when in the water and testers felt the range of motion was also better in the Pro Racer.

Zhik

The Zhik buoyancy aid was the staff favorite in the dinghy sailing category because of its overall fit and comfort. It was easy to put on and fit well without riding up in the water. The Zhik was also the least bulky of the jackets and was easy to swim in, making it the “Staff Pick” of this category. This is perhaps because it had more room in the shoulders than some of the other jackets.

Stohlquist Kitty

A close runner up to the Zhik was the US Coast Guard-approved Stohlquist Kitty ($99.99), available at West Marine. It rated well due to its overall comfort. It had multiple adjustments, which allowed for a snug fit, yet it offered a wide range of motion. The neoprene in the shoulders provided comfort and stretch, and the jacket didn’t ride up in the back or neck region. Although this was a women’s model, a comparable men’s variety from Stohlquist is available.

Watersports Life Jackets

Watersports participants typically play hard and fall harder. Because of this, they demand a life jacket that moves with their body, protects them upon impact with the water, and offers some degree of flotation. In the United States, the typical life jacket for this type of activity is a Coast Guard-approved Type III life jacket. The Coast Guard label on the inside of the jacket will typically specify if a life jacket is intended for this activity.

The popularity of watersports has grown, manufacturers have responded with specialty jackets suited for aggressive riders. While some of these jackets are Coast Guard-approved, many lack the required flotation for Coast Guard approval. Retailers of non Coast Guard-approved (non-CGA) jackets are careful to specify if these jackets are only permissible for use on a private body of water or for use by riders at sanctioned competitions. Outside of these two exceptions, non-CGA jacket will not meet the wear or carriage requirements in the United States.

Liquid Force Cardigan

An extreme example of a non-CGA jacket is the Liquid Force Cardigan competition vest. Our testers noted that it was essentially a wet suit top, though in fairness, it is marketed as such and makes no promise of flotation whatsoever. It is designed without straps, buckles or zippers, and has just enough padding to take the sting out of an unexpected spill. Our testers could not recommend this vest for any activity where flotation is desired or required.

The O’Neill Outlaw Comp is also not Coast Guard-approved, but it offers substantially more flotation than the Cardigan. At first glance, you might even guess it is Coast Guard-approved. That is, until you compare it side by side to the O’Neill Law. ($130.00). The Law is essentially the same design, with thicker panels to provide the flotation needed to secure Coast Guard approval. Both jackets fit well, but testers favored the Outlaw over the Law because it was less bulky and hot.

Ski Pro Impact Vest

The first thing that struck us about the Coast Guard-approved Ski Pro Impact Vest ($49.99), was the label on the outside that stated “Impact Tested to 100mph.” To make such a claim, the vest must use oversized components and extra stitching to prevent the jacket from disintegrating upon impact with the water. Although speeding at 100 mph is highly unlikely for most recreational boaters, 50 mph+ isn’t out of the question. The Ski Pro was the “Staff Pick” in this category because it had a snug yet comfortable fit. Testers did comment that the jacket gets hot after awhile, but you could wear this jacket for hours provided you were getting wet periodically.

Baltic Rekord

We included the European marketed Baltic Rekord ($122.63) non-CGA device in this category even though it is not designed for aggressive watersports performance. It looks somewhat similar to a US Coast Guard-approved Type III but is more suitable for lounging around the boat due to the fact it lacks buckles. Even though the Rekord had a drawstring to cinch the bottom of the jacket, without buckles, it rode up easily when in the water. Swimming in this jacket was challenging, and the metal zipper concerned us when we realized it could hit your teeth, if your hand snapped forward.

Clothing Style Life Jackets

We often hear complaints that life jackets are too hot to wear for an extended period of time. However, the life jackets in this category were designed to provide warmth, which was certainly of great benefit, especially for those who boat in colder weather.
Comfortable & Stylish Fishing Style Jackets

Coast Guard statistics show that anglers are particularly vulnerable as they often boat alone and in cold weather. A few lifejackets sit side by side. For this reason, the BoatUS Foundation has worked closely with the angling community on boating safety for over a decade. Among the excuses given by anglers for not wearing a life jacket is they get in the way of casting a rod. Manufacturers of life jackets have attempted to address this concern by repositioning flotation in these active wear life jackets and making them more multi-functional.

Stormy Seas Expedition

The Stormy Seas Expedition is a vest style life jacket that is very comfortable out of the water. It was stylish and hard to differentiate from a typical fleece-lined nylon vest. It had no substantial adjustments so it is not restrictive and inflates easily with a pull of a lanyard. However, when fully inflated the zippered tend to come down which made testers nervous that they would eventually slip out of the vest. None of the Stormy Seas jackets were auto-inflatable or Coast Guard-approved. All were difficult to swim in while wearing. However, in colder water it is best to conserve energy and draw your legs and arms to your chest to keep the jacket low and in place. The Surf and Turf was a “Staff Pick” due to its comfort on land and in the water, and its fashionable styling.

Stormy Seas Newport, North Pacific and Alaskan Sweater

The Stormy Seas line of jackets, created by an Alaskan fisherman, was designed specifically for recreational and working waterman. Each design in the Stormy Seas line is a functional piece of clothing, designed to be warm and wearable with an inflatable bladder sewn in to provide buoyancy when manually deployed. Despite not being Coast Guard-approved, these jackets all have 35lbs of buoyancy, the most of any of the jackets we tested, but testers found they needed to top off the jackets using the manual inflation tube.

The Stormy Seas Newport is a vest style life jacket that is very comfortable out of the water. It was stylish and hard to differentiate from a typical fleece-lined nylon vest. It had no substantial adjustments so it is not restrictive and inflates easily with a pull of a lanyard. However, when fully inflated the vest tended to come down which made testers nervous that they would eventually slip out of the vest. None of the Stormy Seas jackets were auto-inflatable or Coast Guard-approved. All were difficult to swim in while wearing. However, in colder water it is best to conserve energy and draw your legs and arms to your chest to keep the jacket low and in place.

Baltic Surf & Turf

A final product in this category, and a hands-down “Staff Pick,” was the Baltic Surf & Turf ($112.13). The Surf & Turf is a refreshing new design that is a vest style life jacket that is very comfortable out of the water. It was stylish and hard to differentiate from a typical fleece-lined nylon vest. It had no substantial adjustments so it is not restrictive and inflates easily with a pull of a lanyard. However, when fully inflated the vest tended to come down which made testers nervous that they would eventually slip out of the vest. None of the Stormy Seas jackets were auto-inflatable or Coast Guard-approved. All were difficult to swim in while wearing. However, in colder water it is best to conserve energy and draw your legs and arms to your chest to keep the jacket low and in place. The Surf and Turf was a “Staff Pick” due to its comfort on land and in the water, and its fashionable styling.

Staff Pick - The Onyx Classic Fishing Vest

The favorite in this group and our “Staff Pick” was the Onyx, available at West Marine. It edged out the Storms slightly because the straps prevented it from riding up or shifting. The back of the vest also has some flotation that was designed to ride up slightly to keep the head and neck positioned up when treading water, which made our testers feel more secure. The price of the Onyx was also reasonable, especially when you consider it is a fishing vest and life jacket in one.

Final Thoughts

Of the 30 jackets evaluated by the Foundation, all but one would most likely help keep you afloat when worn and adjusted properly. The one exception was in the watersports category, the Liquid Cardigan, was so thin that we couldn’t recommend it. It was not Coast Guard-approved. Overall many of the ISO-approved jackets, available primarily on the European market, performed like similarly styled USCG-approved jackets. In fact, two of our six “Staff Picks” were not USCG-approved, but ISO-approved jackets. These jackets do not currently meet the USCG carriage requirements, and can be difficult to find in the US. Upon closer inspection one type of the ISO approved jackets, the level 30 approved buoyancy aids, did offer less flotation, but rated consistently higher in overall comfort.

Comfort can be costly. All of our “Staff Picks” in each category cost more than the basic Type II or Type III USCG-approved jackets. The highest price jackets were not always the top performers, but it does seem that the most comfortable jackets, the ones that are more likely to be worn, require an investment. Our least expensive “Staff Picks” were in the watersports and fishing categories and at $49.99 are still more than twice the price of the basic universal fit Type III USCG jacket tested. Considering your boating activity is essential in choosing the best jacket for you. Many of the inflatable life jackets offered unmatched flotation, but proved to be too cumbersome should you need to perform a self rescue or swim any distance. Many of the buoyancy aids and less bulky jackets allowed testers greater comfort when dry and increased mobility in the water, but lacked the freeboard see with USCG-approved jackets.

Tips for selecting the right jacket for you:

Select a jacket based on your intended activity. Check out the label on the jacket or marketing material to see if it appropriate for your intended use. Purchase a jacket that is sized for you, not a “universal” fit. Make your life jacket a piece of personal safety gear, and not intended general use. The more adjustments, the better they tend to fit. However, the more adjustments there are, the harder they are to get into. Also, extra buckles and straps can snap.