

Personal Flotation Device FAQs

Why do I need to wear a PFD?

After a thorough review of the Rowing Levels Policy, observations of MRC scullers that have started to use PFDs on their own accord, an understanding that technological advances have made wearable PFDs far less cumbersome than traditional PFDs and in consideration of past rowing incidents where PFDs would have saved lives, the Safety Committee, with Board approval, has updated our safety policy to require PFDs in situations of cold water/faster current when unaccompanied.

Who needs to wear a PFD?

The updated MRC Rowing Safety Levels Policy requires the wearing of PFDs in Rowing Levels 3 and 4 for qualified rowers in unaccompanied boats. Qualified rowers are defined by the policy as 4th year and above with level IV bow in Rowing Level 3 and level III or IV bow in Rowing Level 4.

What Does “Unaccompanied” Mean?

Rowing without a launch (which has PFDs aboard) equals “unaccompanied”.

When do I need to wear a PFD?

[USRowing](#) recommends that all unaccompanied shells carry Coast Guard approved PFDs. We are not, at this time, requiring unaccompanied boats to wear PFDs all the time. Rowing levels 3 & 4 occur mainly in the spring and for a brief period of time. The majority of the season is Level 5 which does not dictate the wearing of a PFD.

How often are we in rowing levels 3 and 4?

A review of water temps and flow from 2000 to 2017 revealed that we are at rowing level 3 or 4 on average 49 days per rowing season (defined as April 1 to Oct 31). This amounts to 23% of rowing days. This does not necessarily equate to one quarter of your personal rows. If rowing during these levels with a launch a PFD is not required. Those in registered programs will wear a PFD a much lower percentage of time as will independent rowers who choose not to row during Rowing Level 3 or 4. Additionally, we are not always on the water April 1.

Can I just put it in the boat and not wear it?

MRC is requiring you wear the PFD in Level 3 & 4 rowing levels. Water conditions at these levels create a hazardous situation for rowers who have fallen from a boat and are not under the supervision of a launch. (See [Cold Water Facts](#) from Row Safe USA) The current is fast and the water is cold. The extra time to find, put on and inflate your PFD can decrease your odds of survival.

What kind of PFD do I need?

MRC is recommending any US Coast Guard approved PFD that you are comfortable wearing. The ‘fanny pack’ PFD is most conducive to rowing: it is narrow, clips around your waist and can be worn low on your back. Although most users of this type feel the design of the fanny pack PFD does not inhibit their rowing, we understand some may feel this is the case. Please remember, the period where we are requiring PFDs is short and it is only when not accompanied by a launch and it is not during racing.

USRowing says, “there are a lot of options for PFDs — some of which are compatible for wearing while rowing” and an increasing number of clubs are now recommending them for cold water safety. Cold water clubs including Duluth, Vancouver and Grand Rapids are among those that require PFDs. Review PFD options [here](#).

Should I purchase a self-inflating PFD or a manual one?

We recommend using personal discretion when making this decision. The self-inflating PFDs are more expensive (and do not inflate in the rain). However, if you feel for any reason you may be unable to inflate yourself, a self-inflating PFD may be a better option for you.

Isn't my boat and/or my oars a suitable flotation device?

No. The boat is not a Personal Flotation Device (PFD); it is an Emergency flotation device. You should always remain with your boat if you find yourself unexpectedly out of your boat and in water. The boat will most likely float, but in the situation where you are separated from your boat, you will need a PFD. **Oars are not a PFD nor emergency flotation device.** Modern oars will fill with water in a matter of minutes and lose any expected flotation.

Won't a PFD hinder my ability to get back in my boat?

A PFD has the potential to hinder an individual's ability to get back into a flipped boat if inflated but also provides an incredibly valuable safety net if cold incapacitation sets in.

I am a good swimmer, why should I wear a PFD?

From Row Safe USA: 'Rowers should understand this: no matter how strong you are or how good a swimmer you are, cold water inhibits neuromuscular function.' <http://rowsafeusa.org/cold-facts/> Strong swimmers still succumb to [cold incapacitation in under 10 minutes](#). Even if close to shore, a strong current may keep you from reaching safety in this short amount of time as you begin to lose the effective use of your fingers, arms and legs for any meaningful movement

Are We the Only Club Making This Requirement?

No, many clubs currently require PFDs and many more are considering making this a new requirement. A short list of clubs that require PFDs is included below.

- Alaska RC
- Duluth RC
- Fredericton Rowing Club
- Grand Rapids RC
- Halifax Rowing Club (Canada)
- Merrimack River RA
- Petone RC in Wellington NZ
- Riverfront Recapture
- Vancouver Rowing Club
- Wellington RC, NZ

Will we be racing in these?

No. Most of the races MRC participates in are not in dangerous conditions. Duluth may offer cold water, but it is not unaccompanied rowing. All regattas have multiple launches.

Is this for all boat types?

Yes. Even 8+s.

Why isn't MRC flip-testing or holding swim tests for rowers?

The safety committee is reviewing both these options. Presently, all rowers sign a waiver that they are competent swimmers and watch a video prior to each season detailing how to return into a flipped 1x. The procedure for both of these may change in the future.