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Watercraft Safety Is Key to Summer Fun

According to the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, as many as 150,000 watercraft can be found along the Connecticut shoreline in Long Island Sound and on rivers, lakes, ponds, and streams in the state. This number includes powerboats, sailboats, canoes, kayaks, and personal watercraft (PWC). No matter which type of vessel is used, attention to safety measures is a must, and taking an appropriate boating class is a good idea before climbing aboard.

Although a variety of mishaps may occur while on the water, collisions with other boats constitute the major type of water accident. While this is particularly true for motorboats, resulting in a 51% fatality rate for users, the highest collision rate of any type of watercraft belongs to personal watercraft at 77%. (Rates provided by All State Insurance.) According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, as the popularity of PWC has grown, there has been a “dramatic increase in injuries and deaths” related to their use. This increase in injuries and fatalities in part can be attributed to the fact that more and more people are buying and operating PWC. In 1990, 240,000 PWC were in operation – by 1995, that number had grown to 760,000. Current estimates place the number of PWC in use at about 1 million. In addition, these craft are faster than ever, there is no ability to brake, and they can only be properly controlled at full throttle. While drowning is the most common cause of death in water-related injuries, PWC are the only recreational vessels for which blunt force trauma is the primary cause of death.

In Connecticut, all operators of motorboats and sailboats over 19½ feet must possess a Safe Boating Certificate, which is issued only upon passing a basic boating course. All operators of PWC must possess a Certificate of Personal Watercraft Operation, and since March of 2004, must be at least 16 years old unless there is someone over 18 years old who possesses a CPWO on board. (Those under 16 years of age who had obtained a CPWO prior to 3/9/04 can continue to operate a PWC, but it is recommended that they be accompanied by someone who is at least 18 years old and possesses a WPCO). A CWCO is only issued after the person passes an approved combination basic boating/personal watercraft course, or a basic boating course and a 2 ½ hour PWC course.

In addition to the relatively new dangers involved with personal watercraft, a recent fad called “teaking,” has emerged that poses a threat to the safety of those who participate. “Teaking” refers to the practice of swimmers hanging onto the swim platform behind a powerboat and getting towed through the water. Not only is there the danger of injury from a propeller, but the swimmer is exposed to carbon monoxide poisoning as the exhaust fumes are trapped behind the boat. One person died in Connecticut in 2004 from carbon monoxide poisoning while “teaking.”

No matter what type of craft is being used on the water, some safety tips are universal. One rule that applies to all forms of boating (including PWC) is that personal floatation devices (PDFs) must be used. While the law requires that a wearable PFD in good condition of the proper size and type for each boat occupant must be readily accessible (not locked in plastic bags or compartments), it is best to wear the

PDF at all times. The majority of boating fatalities are caused by drowning, frequently the result of capsizing or falling overboard. Of the victims who drown, statistics reveal 9 out of 10 did not have a PFD on.

When someone falls overboard or the boat capsizes, he or she should stay with the boat. Since the human body loses heat 25 times faster in water than in air of the same temperature, the risk of hypothermia can be great. PFDs can lower the threat of hypothermia by keeping the head above water, providing insulation from heat loss, and decreasing the amount of movement necessary to remain afloat, allowing the person to conserve heat by bending the legs and arms into a near fetal position. If more than one person lands in the water, huddling together can also help to maintain body heat.

Most boating accidents are preventable. The U.S. Coast Guard states “a primary cause of boating accidents continues to be operator inattention, inexperience, or careless and reckless operation rather than boat equipment or environmental factors.” Factors that can be controlled include choosing to wear a PFD, driving the craft at a safe speed, having a proper lookout, and not using alcohol or drugs. Also, it is important to obey the “rules of the road,” respect bad weather, refrain from overloading the boat, and learn to swim. When operating a motorized boat, emergency supplies such as a radio, extra batteries, maps, flares, a first aid kit, and a fire extinguisher should be on board. Boaters should always let someone on shore know where they plan to go and when they expect to return.

To learn more about boating in Connecticut, the state Department of Environmental Protection’s Boating Division may be contacted at 860-434-8638 (www.dep.state.ct.us). Further information about boating safety is available from the Coast Guard by calling 800-368-5647 (www.uscgboating.org). Additional information about this or other public health concerns can be obtained by calling the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org).