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Buoyancy Aids and Life Jackets - (PFDs)

*There are two basic types of personal flotation devices (PFD's) a 'Buoyancy Aid' and a 'Life Jacket'
A Lifejacket can be available in either a "Solid or Inflatable Version"*

Personal Flotation Devices

Buoyancy Aid -A device that helps keep a person afloat in the water

Life Jacket - A device that helps keep a person afloat in the water AND will turn an unconscious person onto their back should they end up face down in the water .

There are 5 international standards for PFD's
Lets look at each one in slightly more detail...

EN ISO 12402-5

(EN 394) This is your typical 50N Buoyancy Aid, it will help keep you afloat, but it will not turn you onto your back if you end up face down and unconscious in the water.
50 Newton Foam Buoyancy Aid, Mainly used for active surface water sports:

- Dinghy Sailing
- Canoeing
- Kite Surfing

Only suitable for competent swimmers in sheltered water use, where help is close at hand. Only provides support to conscious people who can help themselves.

EN ISO 12402-4

(EN 395) This is a half-way house between the above and a 'Life Jacket', it provides 100N of buoyancy, and although it often looks like a life jacket, the standard does not require it to turn an unconscious person onto their back. These are often used a child's Life Jacket, typically someone who weighs under 40kg.

100 Newton Foam Lifejacket

- Dinghy Sailing
- Sports boat
- Powerboat (Including RIBs)

Suitable for swimmers and non swimmers, inshore and coastal waters. They give a reasonable assurance of safety from drowning in relatively calm water. Not guaranteed to self right an unconscious user wearing waterproof clothing and should not be expected to protect the airway of an unconscious person in rough water.

EN ISO 12402-3

(EN 396) This is a Life Jacket that provides 150N of buoyancy that will turn an unconscious person onto their back. It is required to have at least the following, reflective strip, whistle, toggle to set gas bottle inflation off, manual oral inflation tube, lifting strap.

150 Newton Inflatable Lifejacket

- Yachting
- Sports boat
- Powerboat (Including RIBs)

Use :
Swimmers and non swimmers. For use in all but the most severe conditions. May not immediately self right an unconscious user wearing heavy waterproof clothing.

EN ISO 12402-2

(EN 399) This is the same as the 150N Life Jacket but provides 275N of buoyancy and is designed for people who are wearing heavy foul weather kit in serious offshore conditions. They are still required to have as a minimum the features detailed for a 150N Life Jacket above.

275 Newton Inflatable Lifejacket

- Yachting
- Sports boat
- Powerboat (Including RIBs)

Use: Swimmers and non swimmers. A high performance device for offshore and severe conditions, when maximum protection is required or where heavy waterproof clothing is worn. While they cannot be guaranteed to self right an unconscious user wearing heavy water-proofs the buoyancy they provide should ensure they will in the great majority of cases.

EN ISO 12402-1 This standard is for PFDs on large commercial sea going ships and not generally applicable to the leisure or small commercial boat sector.

There are many optional extras for Life Jackets such as auto inflation triggered by water (normally some type of pellet device) or water pressure (Hammar), crutch straps, lights, line cutters, spray hood, deck-line attachment point etc.

Choice of PFD and optional extras is a personal choice and may be limited due to many factors including comfort, physical size of person, price, area of operation etc.
Many manufacturers advertise Life Jackets as 170N or 190N, these only meet the 150N standard there is no 170N or 190N standard. However, The manufacturers may quote "an increased flotation capability to 170N/190N.

In the United Kingdom it is not a legal requirement to have or even wear a PFD when afloat, the rules and regulations vary depending on where you are in the world, some countries require you to have one but not wear them, whilst others require them to be worn on all vessels under a certain length.

Always check the relevant regulations of your place of launch.
Before boating outside the UK it is advised to check on local regulations...

The Royal Yachting Association (<http://www.rya.org.uk>)
Royal National Lifeboat Institute (<http://www.rnli.org>)
Maritime Coastguard Agency (<http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/mca>)
All the above Links are good sources of information.

All PFDs require servicing, anything from a simple visual inspection to replacing spent gas cylinders, all manufacturers provide details regarding the servicing regime 'their' device requires. As a minimum this should be done annually, possibly more frequently, depending on how often and where the device is used.

**EN - European Standard (Number)

Please Remember.. –Any type of PFD is 'Useless Unless Worn ****