

Getting a Vessel Safety Check Means Boating Smart

By Wayne Spivak and Robert Daraio - United States Coast Guard Auxiliary

It is a known fact that safe boats do save lives. For recreational boaters, operating any size or type of boat, safety should be an all-important part of the boating experience. In addition to wearing lifejackets and completing a boating safety course, getting an annual Vessel Safety Check of your boat is an ideal way to boat smart from the start.

What is a Vessel Safety Check? A Vessel Safety Check (VSC) is a *free* courtesy check of your boat (vessel) to verify the presence and condition of specific safety equipment required by Federal, state and local regulations. A Vessel Examiner is a certified member of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary and/or the U.S. Power Squadrons who is trained to conduct a VSC. He or she will perform the VSC on your boat, discuss the purpose and value of required and optional marine safety equipment, answer any boating related safety questions, and make recommendations that will help make you a safer boater. In addition to boating safety education, some important new Homeland Security rules for boaters are discussed.

“A VSC is a public service intended to serve as prevention through education. It is also intended to help recreational boaters gain a respect for the boating environment,” says Peter Urgola, Department Chief of Vessel Examination for the Auxiliary. “What the boater will receive is a copy of the safety check and basic evaluation so that the boater can learn about safety equipment, safety precautions, and follow some of the suggestions for a safe outing.”

It is important to note that a VSC usually takes about 20-30 minutes to perform, is totally voluntary, is not a boarding or a law enforcement action, and there are no citations ever given as a result. Boats that “pass” a VSC will receive a distinctive VSC decal, which is displayed on your boat. “The decal does not exempt the boater from a law enforcement boarding, but it does indicate that the boat has received a Vessel Safety Check and will better prepare the operator for a more positive encounter should he or she get boarded by a law enforcement officer,” says Urgola.

Obtaining a VSC has some great benefits. According to Urgola, passing a VSC will qualify the boat for a discount from some participating marine insurance companies. Additionally, if your boat does not pass the VSC, you can receive discounts on missing or replacement boating safety equipment items. Simply take a copy of the VSC report to the nearest participating retailer, purchase those items, and return to get another VSC completed.

A VSC can be a valuable learning experience for the boater while providing some extra safety tips. For example, putting plastic covers on boat battery terminals, carrying a VHF marine radio, filing a float plan, de-watering devices, anchor and lines, and carrying a toolkit and first aid kit are just a few.

Before venturing out on the water each time, it is always a good idea to discuss safety and safe operation procedures with your passengers. Fit each passenger with their lifejackets making sure they are fit and snug. Then, locate and discuss the operation of various safety items such as fire extinguishers, VHF radio, flashlights, first aid kits, and life lines.

How do you obtain and schedule a local Vessel Safety Check in your area? This year, from May 20th through July 9th, the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary and U.S. Power Squadrons will be promoting its annual Vessel Safety Check Mega Weeks, where Vessel Examiners will set up VSC stations in your area. To contact a Vessel Examiner directly go to www.vesselsafetycheck.org and click the "I Want A VSC" button. You will also find a wealth of boating safety information and more information about VSCs located there.

You can obtain additional information about the U. S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, boating safety education, and Vessel Safety Checks, and can locate a flotilla unit nearest you, by visiting: www.cgaux.org and going to the "visitors" section.

Wearing lifejackets, taking a boating safety course, boating sober, and getting an annual Vessel Safety Check are important points that will make you a safer boater and a more confident skipper. More importantly, these behaviors and routine practices will help save lives. Perhaps it is true that, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Nevertheless, your family and friends will enjoy themselves knowing your boat has all the appropriate safety gear, is operating safely, and that you are a responsible boater. They will thank you for it, too.

For more information about boating safety from the Coast Guard and Federal boating requirements, visit www.uscgboating.org .

You're In Command - Boat responsibly and Boat Smart From the Start – Get A Vessel Safety Check.

SIDE BAR (Optional)

Here are some suggestions to speed you along towards getting the coveted Vessel Safety Check decal.

1. **Registration/Documentation** – Always have your original registration or documentation papers handy.
2. **Boat Registration Numbers** - Make sure your registration numbers are permanently attached to both sides of the forward half of the boat. The numbers should be in 3-inch, plain, block letters, and in a contrasting color from the hull. The state decals must be placed correctly in accordance with your state's boating registration regulations.
3. **Lifejackets and Personal Flotation Devices** - Make sure that you have a personal flotation device (PFD or lifejacket) for every person on board, in a readily accessible location (and not still in its original plastic bags). Be sure the lifejackets are the correct size for each passenger. Boats 16-feet long or longer must also carry a throwable Type IV PFD as well. If you operate a personal watercraft, you *must* wear your lifejacket and many states require the PFD to be impact-rated. A 100 mile per hour (MPH) impact-rated PFD does not mean that you will be protected in a 100 MPH crash, but rather, the PFD will still float after a 100 MPH crash.
4. **Visual Distress Signals** – Be certain Visual Distress Signals (VDS), such as flares, orange smoke, and other pyrotechnic devices, have not expired. Pyrotechnic devices typically have a 42-month shelf life. While some states do not require day and/or night VDS, it is recommended that all vessels carry both day (signal mirror, or orange flag) and night (strobe, flashlight, or lantern) signals. It is also a good idea to attach a strobe light and whistle to each PFD. Those small items and recommendations, while not required for pass a VSC, can be obtained from most marine dealers and marine catalog retailers.
5. **Fire Extinguishers** – This is an important item. Be sure your fire extinguishers are fully charged, you have sufficient numbers of them for the type and size of your boat, and they are United States Coast Guard (USCG) approved ones. Mounting your fire extinguishers is also a great idea.
6. **Ventilation Systems** - If you have a powerboat with an inboard or inboard/outboard engine, make sure your ventilation system works and, if built after August 1, 1978, displays a proper Certificate of Compliance.
7. **Backfire Flame Arrestor Control Device** - Check to make sure your inboard or inboard/outboard (IO) gasoline engine has a functioning backfire flame arrestor control device. A non-working one can result in a very hazardous situation.

8. **Sound producing devices** - Make certain sure your horn works, and if your boat requires it, have a bell. Once again, it is also a good idea to attach a whistle to each PFD onboard too. Learn the proper use of sound signals and rules of the road.
9. **Navigation Lights** - Check your navigation lights regularly. Many times the bulbs blow, so it is a good idea to carry spare bulbs. Remember, all boats operating between sunset and sunrise and during periods of reduced visibility, must have navigation lights available for use and operating.
10. **Oil Discharge Pollution and Marine Pollution (MARPOL) placards** – Boats, 26- feet in length and over, require both Oil Discharge Pollution and Marine Pollution (MARPOL) placards. Your Vessel Examiner may have those placards to give you. If not, you can also get them from area marinas and boat stores, which are often available at no charge.
11. **Marine Sanitation Devices (MSD)** must be Coast Guard-approved and waste discharge outlets must be capable of being sealed. Check yours!
12. **Navigation Rules** - Vessels over 39.4 feet are required to carry a copy of the Coast Guard Navigation Rules (COLREGs), but it is a good idea for all boats to carry them, as well as local navigation charts of the waters you boat on.
13. **State Boating Regulations** - Make sure you obtain and read a copy of your state and local boating regulations so you can be certain your boat is in compliance. If you boat on waters outside your state of registration, you are required to comply with those state regulations.