

Newhaven Yacht Club

Safety Guide for Crew



This *Safety Guide for Crew* assumes you know nothing about sailing or about yachts. (If you have previously sailed in dinghies, you'll find some of the content familiar.)

1. GENERAL SAFETY ISSUES

This section briefly covers some important safety issues. It is not an exhaustive list.

The Organiser warns all applicant crew and skippers that in providing this list it is not warranting the seaworthiness of boats or the competence of crew or skippers. Applicants should satisfy themselves as to sea-worthiness and competence and should also make their own insurance arrangements

Lifejackets

There are two reasons to wear a lifejacket. If you fall overboard, a lifejacket will:

- keep you afloat until help arrives
- make life safer for those left onboard (they won't have to take such high risks to get back to you if they know you've got a lifejacket to keep you afloat).

Your skipper will have his or her rules about when you must wear a lifejacket. Here are two example rules:

1. you must wear a lifejacket at night and in fog
2. you must wear a lifejacket at all times.

It's a convention amongst sailors that you *will* wear a lifejacket when the skipper says so, but you *may* wear one at any other time. Our **strong advice** is this: wear a lifejacket all the time, whatever the weather and whatever the sea conditions.

The RNLI gives the same advice. Lifeboat crew *always* wear lifejackets when at sea, even when out on exercise on a calm day.

Keeping watch / Looking out

Looking around for hazards such as other vessels and fishermen's flag markers is an important part of what is known as keeping watch (or being *on watch*).

You should get into the habit of looking around you from time to time, including looking to see what's behind the boat (astern). If you see a hazard, say something. Better that two people have noticed an approaching speedboat than that just you have, but you've kept it a secret!

Fire

Fire is a danger on boats because you can't simply get off a boat at sea. Sources of fire include gas appliances and electrical faults. Your skipper will have rules about using gas appliances safely.

Make sure you know where to find the boat's fire extinguishers and fire blanket.

Life rafts

Some yachts carry an emergency life raft, which is a purpose-built, self-inflating dinghy, usually with a hood. The skipper will decide when to deploy a life raft and abandon ship. If you were left on your own, would you know how to deploy the life raft? The procedure is usually very simple, and so it's a good idea to ask your skipper.

Flares

If you are left to summon help in an emergency, the radio is the best way (see next section).

If the radio stops working, you can summon help by firing emergency flares. Usually, you would fire a red parachute flare, wait two minutes and fire another one.

If a lifeboat or other vessel is coming to rescue you, and they are finding it difficult to locate you, you could fire an orange smoke flare (or any kind of flare), so they can see you.

Ask your skipper where the flares are kept.

2. EMERGENCIES

If something goes wrong while you're out sailing, the skipper will decide what to do and give you clear instructions.

Dealing with an emergency alone

It is extremely unlikely that you would be left to cope with an emergency on your own, but your skipper might be taken seriously ill, or suffer an accident that leaves him or her unconscious. There's even a *very* small chance your skipper will fall overboard.

If you're left to cope with an emergency:

- summon help by contacting the coastguard
- make sure you and the boat are safe
- if you can, make things better (for example, fight a small fire using an extinguisher).

If your skipper falls overboard, the absolute priority is to contact the coastguard and tell them as accurately as you can where you are. Then keep yourself and the boat as safe as possible. If you have the skills to stop the boat or to get the boat back to where the skipper went overboard, so much the better. But, as a beginner, your number one priority is to call the coastguard for help.

Contacting the coastguard

There are two ways to contact the coastguard in an emergency:

- dial 999 on a mobile phone and ask for the coastguard.
- send a distress message (a Mayday) using the boat's VHF radio

WARNING: there are places along the coast where you cannot get a **mobile phone** signal, therefore it's important to know how to summon help using the boat's VHF radio.

VHF radios on boats have a button you must press when you want to talk and which you must release when you have finished speaking and want to listen (it's called *press-to-talk* technology).

At the very least, when you go on a boat for the first time, learn:

- where the main VHF radio is, and how to turn it on
- which button to press to send a DSC Mayday (if DSC is available)
- which button to press to switch the radio to the emergency calling channel (channel 16)
- which button to press when you want to talk, and release when you want to listen
- where the handheld VHF radio is kept, how to turn it on, how to switch to channel 16, and which is the press-to-talk button

Making the boat safe

If you're left to deal with an emergency on your own, *first radio for help*. Then look around and try to work out what the boat is doing. Think how to make the boat safe while waiting for help to arrive.

As a general rule, you want to be moving along the coast, or away from it.

Unless you are a long way from shore, you don't want to be moving towards the shore.

Ask yourself:

- Can you start the engine and use that to keep the boat safe?
- Could it help to heave to?
- Do you know how to put the anchor down, and would that be helpful?

Using the engine

The details of how to start the engine vary from boat to boat, but the principles are straightforward.

SAFETY WARNING: if you've left sails to flap, make sure *before* you start the engine that there are no ropes dangling in the water that could get wrapped around the propeller.

Once the engine is driving the boat, you can steer away from danger.

If you have a choice, try to steer towards the general direction of the wind, so that the sails stop pulling the boat. If you know how to, try to reduce sail (see next section).

When you go on a new boat, watch how the skipper starts the engine, or ask if you can be taken through the steps.

Reducing sail

Unless you need to sail away from danger, reducing sail is usually helpful.

Most yachts have a furling fore-sail - you roll the sail away by releasing the ropes (called sheets) holding the sail in, and pulling on a furling line.

Some yachts have a furling mainsail, which can be rolled away with a furling line just like a fore-sail.

Many skippers use a technique called heaving-to to slow a boat down. Ask your skipper if they use the technique and, if so, whether you can practise it.

Sometimes, it's perfectly safe to leave the sails alone. If you're sailing using the auto-helm and going in a safe direction (along the coast or away from it), it might be safest to do nothing. If the lifeboat is coming out to find you, you won't outrun it.

Similarly, if you are hand steering and going in a safe direction, it might be safest to do nothing with the sails.

On the other hand, if the wind is blowing you away from land, heaving-to will usually be a safe option, because you'll drift away from land.

If you're being blown towards the land, can you turn the boat so that you are sailing slightly away from land? If not, can you heave-to so you sail more slowly? Having done so, can you drop the mainsail and then furl the fore-sail? Can you use the engine to drive into the wind while you drop the mainsail and furl the fore-sail?

Dropping anchor

If you're near the shore, you can stop the boat, or slow it right down, by dropping the anchor.

On one of your first few trips on a new boat, have a conversation with your skipper about anchoring. Details you'll need to know include:

- where is the main anchor (usually at the bow, often in a special locker)?
- is the anchor permanently tied to the boat, so all you need to do is drop it over the bow?
- can you actually lift the anchor to drop it over the side?
- how long is the anchor rode (the mix of chain and rope that ties the anchor to the boat) and therefore what's the deepest water it'll work in?
- where is the boat's depth gauge to find out the depth of water you're in at the moment?

SAFETY WARNING: if the boat is being tossed about by waves, it's dangerous to leave the cockpit and go up to the bow to drop anchor. Can you think of a safer alternative?

And finally on safety

If you've got this far, you've read a lot about safety. Thank you for doing that.

Please don't conclude that we need to spend so long on safety matters because sailing is dangerous.

It's precisely because sailors think long and hard about safety *before* there's a problem that sailing is a very safe pastime.

So, please keep the safety information in mind, but don't be put off.
Go out on the water, be safe, and have fun!