

WHAT ARE INFLATABLE LIFE JACKETS?



Inflatable life jackets rely on CO₂ cylinders that provide buoyancy when inflated vs. inherently buoyant life jackets that use foam or other buoyant materials to stay afloat.

Inflatable life jackets are a less bulky, comfortable alternative to inherently buoyant life jackets.

There are three inflatable life jacket styles – belt pack (worn around the waist like a fanny pack), suspender or stole (worn over the shoulders) and vest (fuller body coverage with pockets). Each features a lightweight, compact design that provides comfort, range of motion, and is cooler to wear in warmer weather.

Inflatables are only approved for use by people age 16 years and older, and are not recommended for non-swimmers. Do not use for active water sports, such as water skiing, tubing, wakeboarding, whitewater activities, or while operating a personal watercraft.

Inflatable life jackets require regular checks and maintenance by the user. Inflatable life jackets are reusable, but, after each use, the CO₂ cylinder needs to be replaced. Replacement CO₂ cylinders can be purchased by contacting the life jacket's manufacturer.

How Do Inflatable Life Jackets Work?

Inflatable life jackets use compressed air, or CO₂, to fill itself with air and provide 45 percent more buoyancy when inflated. This causes the person to float higher and be more visible when the life jacket is inflated. Always read the owner's manual that accompanies the life jacket for instructions or contact the manufacturer.

There are two primary types – manual (inflates with the quick jerk of a cord) or automatic (inflates when submerged in water). Both types can be orally inflated by breathing into the inflation tube/mouthpiece. This is a backup method to inflate the life jacket in case the inflation mechanism malfunctions, and gives you the ability to adjust the comfort of the jacket once inflated. The inflation tube is also how you will deflate the life jacket to repack it.

All inflatable life jackets have these components: air holding chamber, source of compressed gas (usually CO₂), inflation mechanism to discharge gas from the cylinder into the inflation chamber, inflation tube/mouthpiece to add air to the chamber orally or to deflate, and a manual “jerk to inflate” cord. When wearing any inflatable life jacket, be sure the manual “jerk to inflate” cord is easily accessible.

An automatic inflatable life jacket will automatically inflate when the life jacket is submerged in at least four inches of water, either when a small tablet dissolves in water and causes the inflator to activate or when using an internal water pressure gauge that activates the inflator. In addition to automatically inflating, every automatic inflatable life jacket has a “jerk to inflate” cord in case the automatic mechanism fails or the life jacket may be inflated by breathing into the inflation tube.