

# How to Put on a Canoe or Kayak PFD

At first it may seem silly to write an article on how to put on a canoe or kayak PFD. While properly wearing a kayaking or canoeing PFD would seem like an easy task, you'd be surprised how many paddlers out there do not wear one correctly. Among the problems that canoe and kayak paddlers have with PFDs are that personal flotation devices are often too big for the wearer. Furthermore, if the straps are incorrectly tightened it can make the PFD uncomfortable to wear. This step-by-step will give you an organized way to ensure you are always wearing your PFD properly while kayaking and canoeing.

## 1 - Choose the Proper Size and Type of PFD

The United States Coast Guard has established the guidelines and specifications for all personal flotation devices. People who paddle kayaks, canoes, and rafts generally wear a Type III PFD. Make sure you are wearing a PFD that is made for paddling. Also ensure that you wear a PFD that is made for your weight, size, or chest dimension. These details will all be listed on the inside of the PFD, usually on a tag that is sewn in.

## 2 - Loosen All Fittings on Your PFD

First you should take the PFD and loosen all of the straps and unbuckle all of the buckles. This will ensure that when you put it on you can properly secure it to your body. It may seem like a waste of time to do this, especially if this is the PFD that you wear all of the time. Indeed, you can make the decision to skip this step if you wish. Just keep in mind that even if the PFD was properly fitted the last time you wore it, if you are wearing a different thickness material under it such as a wetsuit or paddling jacket or even if you ate too much for breakfast your PFD won't fit the same as the last time you wore it.

## 3 - Place the PFD on Your Body

With all of the straps untied, unbuckled, and loose, place the PFD on your body. Allow it to rest in the position where it should be.

## 4 - Zip the PFD

The first thing you need to do before you tighten any kayak PFD straps or secure any buckles is to pull up, or in rare cases down, the main zipper which connects the two sides of the PFD. Before attaching the zipper into itself, check that it moves freely and that the teeth of the zipper are free from any debris or corrosion. Attach and pull the zipper to its end point, making sure not to force it if it starts to jam. If the zipper is damaged, your PFD is no longer usable.

## 5 - Attach the Buckles of the PFD

Once the zipper is pulled all the way closed, buckle all buckles and attach all buttons on the PFD. The main buckle, which may also be the only one, is usually right under the zipper at the base of the PFD so that if for some reason the zipper gets undone the buckle is still holding the PFD on your body. Some kayak PFDs also have a little button that straps over the zipper to keep it from sliding back.

## 6 - Pull the PFD Waist Strap Tight

Take the strap attached to the buckle that secures the PFD around your waist or midsection and pull it to remove any slack. Don't pull this too tight at this time. You can adjust it after all other straps are tight. If you pull any strap too tight, you can simply lift up on the part of the buckle that is sticking out in the direction you pulled the strap and it will loosen up the strap.

## **7 - Pull the PFD Side Straps Tight**

Most kayaking PFDs have sets of straps on each side of the paddler's body. Keeping the PFD centered on your torso, begin to pull one of the straps on the side of the PFD. Don't over tighten the strap until the other side is pulled tight also. Alternating sides, do the same on the other side. Make sure to pull all four to six straps gradually tight while alternating the side you pull from. The reason for this is because it is easy to over tighten one side which will make the PFD lopsided on your body.

Once all of the slack is out of all of the side straps you may tighten to comfort. The idea is to hold the PFD securely in place without being uncomfortable, restricting mobility, or hindering breathing. It may be necessary to loosen the straps and begin the tightening sequence again.

## **8 - Tighten the PFD Shoulder Straps**

Check to see if the canoe PFD is secured to your body where it should be and is comfortable. If it is riding too low, you may need to loosen things up and reposition it. Once in place, tighten the straps that are on each shoulder. There should be no gap between the strap and your shoulder or else the PFD could ride up on you if you are floating in the water.

## **9 - Check the Fit of the PFD**

When the PFD is securely on your body with all zippers, buckles, buttons, and straps securely fastened, you need to check the PFD fit. If another person is available to do this for you, you should hold your arms out to your side and have the other person pull up on the shoulder straps – the PFD should stay in place and not pull up over your face. If no one is available to do this check for you, simply grab your own shoulder straps and make sure the PFD is securely on your body. Also, ensure it is not too tight by making sure it doesn't cause any pain and that it doesn't hinder breathing or mobility.