

Webbing straps can degrade with UV and chafe, and stitching can get worn, so give it all a careful once-over

Being confident to open your lifejacket will give you peace of mind that all is in good working order

Check the buckles and tether attachments aren't bent or cracked



Run your hands over the webbing and stitching

How to Service your lifejacket

Checking your lifejacket is in top condition should be done at least every season, says Bruce Jacobs

Attitudes to wearing lifejackets have changed slowly but surely, says offshore sailing instructor and Rubicon 3 founder, Bruce Jacobs. As with car seatbelts, lifejackets are something that we automatically wear out on the water rather than just something to be worn in extremis. Clearly, personal responsibility and good seamanship do much to avoid a man overboard, but modern lifejackets are more lightweight and comfortable to wear than older models, giving us little reason not to put one on.



Lifejackets have a hard life. They're used and abused during the season, soaking with salt water, dried in the sun, or shoved damp into a cramped locker.

Giving it a thorough check and service, at least once a season is absolutely vital, as well as checking a few key features throughout the season. If you haven't had your lifejackets serviced professionally in a couple of years, it's worth doing so to give them a more thorough set of checks, and for the peace of mind that everything is in order.

GJW Direct offers some of the most comprehensive boat insurance policies on the market, at very competitive prices. With over 175 years in marine insurance, when you insure your yacht with us, you're dealing with the boat insurance specialists, leaving you free to enjoy your time on the water.

Part of this change has also been that lifejackets are seen as personal equipment, part of an individual's sailing gear for which they are personally responsible, though many boat owners still carry lifejackets for their full crew.

Either way, you need to be confident that your lifejacket or lifejackets are in good working order and can be relied upon in an emergency.

VISUAL INSPECTION

1 Lifejackets have a tough life, but they need to be in good condition. Look for wear or chafe on the outer casing. Then look at the harness – run your hands down the webbing, looking closely that the stitching is in good condition, and that there are no cuts, tears or UV damage. Then look at the buckle. If it is made of metal there is little that can go wrong, but check it's not bent and the webbing attachment is in good order. If it's a plastic buckle, make sure there are no chips or cracks, and the spring arms work correctly.

2 The crotch strap is an essential part of the lifejacket for keeping it close to your body in the water. The weak link here is the plastic buckle on either end as they are prone to being trodden on or caught in a hatch. Check both arms of the male part and the surround of the female part. There should be no cracks or splits. Replace it if there are.

3 Open up the casing by pulling open the zip or Velcro closure. Take some photos of the folded bladder at each stage as you're unfolding it, to help remind you how to repack it correctly. Once unfolded look for any sign of physical damage, mould or mildew. A corroded gas canister can be rough enough to damage the bladder. The reflective tape needs to be fully attached and in good condition, and the stitching should all be intact. Now is a good moment to look after the zips if you have them. A bit of silicone spray will prevent friction and protect the zip.

Unfold the bladder to look at the reflective strips, bladder and internal equipment



Images: Matthew Sheehan



Practice deploying the hood while it is inflated



Does the lifejacket maintain pressure for at least 12 hours?



Screw in the cartridge and replace the green clip over the manual arm

INTERNAL EQUIPMENT

4 The equipment attached inside the lifejacket is critical in a real man overboard situation. Check that the whistle is attached. If the light (and yours should have a light) has a test button use this, or trigger the light by dipping the contacts into water. Make sure the oral inflation tube is in good nick – you'll check the valve when you inflate it. If you have an AIS beacon or a PLB attached, use the self-test function on this. The hood is another essential piece of equipment to prevent secondary drowning. The seams and windows of the hood can degrade over time, so replace this if necessary.

5 On a manual-only firing mechanism, the lever should be closed and the green tag in place. This will be the case on the manual trigger for an automatic too, but you'll also need to check the automatic cartridge is in date, and has the green end cap in place. If the end is red, it's been fired. If you do need to replace the canister, cartridge, or clips, be sure to use the correctly specified one for your jacket.

6 Next, unscrew the gas cylinder. This is fairly susceptible to corrosion as they sit in a damp environment for much of the time. Check the outside of the cylinder and the screw threads, and the end cap should be intact and not punctured. If that's all in order, screw it back in. If not, replace the canister and check any rubber O-rings. Check the cylinder matches the specification printed on the lifejacket.



Check the inflation canister matches the specification on the lifejacket



Fully deflate the lifejacket – use a foot pump if this helps



Be careful to follow folding instructions. Do not roll the bladder

INFLATION

7 The central part of a lifejacket service is to check that it is airtight, and remains so for an extended period of time. To do this, take the end cap off tube and inflate; you can blow into it, but this will introduce moisture. Lifejackets contain a powder to prevent the bladder surfaces from sticking to each other, but the moisture in your breath can prevent this from working. It's better to use a pump if you can, so the air that goes in is dry.

8 Inflate to a fairly firm pressure. You can submerge it for a bubble test, but make sure you have removed the cartridge first, so it doesn't dissolve the salt crystal and fire the canister. The only failsafe test, however, is to leave it overnight for at least 12 hours, ideally 24 hours. While you've got it inflated, it's a good time to try it on and find what it's like to wear. Particularly, have a go at finding and deploying the hood – it's not always easy and it's vital to know how to do this before you need it for real.

9 If, having left the lifejacket overnight, you find it has lost a significant amount of pressure it is probably at the end of its life. You could send it back to the manufacturer to check over, but you shouldn't use a lifejacket that leaks. It's probably time for a replacement. Every lifejacket will include a service record, which will tell you when it was last professionally serviced. If it hasn't been done for a while, it is worth sending it for a full overhaul, even if it stays inflated, for thorough testing and peace of mind.

RE - ARMING

10 If you are happy the lifejacket has no leaks, use the inflation tube cap and invert it to release the valve in the end of the inflation tube. It's crucial to make sure all the air is out, so be patient, or use a foot pump to deflate. Don't use a finger or anything else that could introduce dirt or debris into the valve.

11 Slide the gas canister into any holding clips or coverings, as this helps prevent chafe. Screw the canister into the firing mechanism; it should be hand tight but not so tight as to risk damaging the threads. The bottles can work loose during the season, so this is something you'll want to check on a regular basis.



12 Screw the trigger cartridge back on but don't overtighten it. Check the manual toggle and lay it so it hangs outside the bladder. Replace the green clip over the manual firing arm.

REPACKING

13 Check your lifejacket instructions on how to repack it, as each lifejacket model can have its own intricacies. It's important if you have a separate bladder inside, that the bladder is folded not rolled, as this can prevent inflation. Take care not to trap the bladder in the casing closure and check the lifting becket is easily accessible and properly stowed. Make sure the crotch strap is done up. Finally, stow your lifejacket somewhere dry and protected. Watch the video at bit.ly/lifejacket_service