

After a long winter, summer is finally on the horizon for most of the country.

While many Canadians look forward to recreational activities on the open water, the lengthening days also mark beginning of the high season for water-related injuries and fatalities.

According to a 2013 industry survey, approximately 44 per cent of Canadians participate in recreational boating each year. Although there is some indication that more boaters are following Transport Canada regulations and equipping their boats with lifejackets, unfortunately, almost half of boaters in a 2012 survey indicated they don't wear their lifejackets consistently.

"If your plan is to locate and get into a lifejacket after you've fallen into the water, you're putting yourself and others in danger," says Jack Smith, president of the Canada Safety Council. "Take basic precautions to avoid finding yourself in over your head."

It's a lesson that outspoken TV personality Don Cherry learned the hard way. He had a close call in 2012 that he later related in his memoir *Straight Up and Personal*. Attempting to recover a paddle boat that had drifted from the dock of his cabin near Kingston, Ontario, Cherry headed out on the St. Lawrence River in a canoe. He had brushed off his wife's suggestion to don a lifejacket, a decision he would regret when the canoe capsized. He describes how, clinging to the overturned canoe, his energy quickly flagged with the effort of staying afloat, pre-empting the possibility of swimming ashore. Fortunately, neighbours spotted him in time to summon help. "I thought for sure I was a goner," he told a reporter from the *Kingston Whig-Standard*.

Happily for his family, friends and fans, the famous octogenarian lived to tell his tale, but many boaters aren't so lucky. From 1991 to 2008, an average of 167 people died each year in boating mishaps according to the Canadian Red Cross. Of these, nine out of 10 are not wearing their lifejackets, or were wearing them incorrectly.

Many drowning incidents are preventable. If you enjoy boating, one of the most important things you can do to prevent drowning is to have a lifejacket and wear it every time you're in a boat.

Frequent misperceptions about lifejackets:

"I don't need a lifejacket because I'm a strong swimmer."

Every year, even strong swimmers drown. Where swimming ability was recorded by coroners, almost half of those who died in fatal boating incidents were average to strong swimmers, according to the Canadian Red Cross. Even a confident swimmer can be quickly overwhelmed by factors such as the weight of waterlogged clothing, the disorientation and panic of an unexpected plunge, exhaustion from swimming against a strong current, and the numbing effects of cold water.

Take a plunge in water that is colder than 15 degrees Celsius and you could find yourself suffering from cold shock, a physiological response that will make self-rescue more difficult. Cold shock can cause

hyperventilation, loss of consciousness, heart palpitations and even cardiac arrest for those with pre-existing heart conditions. If your boat overturns in cold water, a properly worn lifejacket will buy you valuable time to assess the situation and reach safety.

"Only boating newbies need to wear lifejackets."

Unfortunately, years of boating experience do not affect your ability to float. If anything, the more time you spend in a boat, the more likely you are to encounter unforeseen circumstances, and the greater benefit you will reap from a habit of properly wearing your lifejacket. Of boating fatalities where boating experience was known, 66 per cent were recorded as experienced boaters, and only 34 per cent were occasional or inexperienced boaters.

If you are an experienced boater, you are likely to be a role model to others. Your decision to wear your lifejacket will help others make the right choice too.

"I only need my lifejacket in a bad weather."

Paradoxically, boating mishaps may actually be more common when the weather is good and waters are calm. Survivors of near-drownings frequently recall how an otherwise unexceptional task or activity quickly went awry.

REMEMBER, a lifejacket only works if you wear it.