

Paddlesports Pre-Trip Safety Checklist

For canoe, kayak, and stand up paddleboard outings - informal groups to organized events

Current risk snapshot: In 2024, U.S. Coast Guard data recorded 143 paddlecraft deaths (canoe, kayak, and SUP), including 124 drownings. Across all recreational boating drownings, most victims were not wearing a PFD. Most fatal paddling incidents are preventable: wear the PFD, match the trip to the group, avoid alcohol/drugs, dress for immersion, and have a communication/rescue plan.

Complete	Checklist Item
<input type="checkbox"/>	Route difficulty and distance match the least-experienced paddler; alternate/short route identified.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Weather, wind, waves, lightning risk, tides/currents, river level/streamflow, dam releases, and water temperature checked within 24 hours and again at launch.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Known hazards reviewed: strainers/sweepers, low-head dams, rapids, cold water, boat traffic, crossings, access points, and bailout locations.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Float plan left with a reliable shore contact: route, launch/takeout, participant count, vehicles, expected return, and overdue call time.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Trip leader sets go/no-go limits for wind, water level, temperature, visibility, participant skill, and emergency response access.

Complete	Checklist Item
<input type="checkbox"/>	Every paddler can swim or has disclosed limitations; minors, medical needs, and emergency contacts accounted for.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Skill check complete: basic strokes, stopping, bracing/balance, wet exit, and self-rescue or assisted rescue expectations.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Buddy system assigned; head count taken before launch, at stops, after hazards, and at takeout.
<input type="checkbox"/>	For larger groups, assign lead, sweep, and middle safety boats; no one passes lead or falls behind sweep.
<input type="checkbox"/>	No alcohol, cannabis, impairing drugs, or reckless behavior before or during the trip.

Complete	Checklist Item
<input type="checkbox"/>	U.S. Coast Guard-approved, properly fitted PFD worn and zipped/buckled at all times on the water; whistle attached.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Clothing matches water temperature, not just air temperature; wetsuit/drysuit or thermal layers for cold water/immersion risk.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Footwear secured to feet; helmet required for whitewater, surf, rocky shallows, or overhead/impact hazards.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sun/heat protection, drinking water, snacks, needed medications, and dry change layer packed in a dry bag.
<input type="checkbox"/>	SUP paddlers: leash appropriate to venue (quick-release for moving water; ankle/calf leash only where entanglement risk is low).

Complete	Checklist Item
<input type="checkbox"/>	Craft inspected: hull/board, seats, thwarts, deck lines, grab loops, skeg/rudder, hatches, valves, flotation/air bags, and tie-downs secure.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Paddle in good condition; spare paddle(s) available; gear secured so it will not sink or become an entrapment hazard.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Rescue kit accessible: throw bag/tow system, first-aid kit, repair kit, knife, pump/bailer/sponge, spare clothing, fire starter as appropriate.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Navigation and communication ready: map/chart, compass/GPS, charged phone in waterproof case, VHF/PLB/satellite messenger where cell service is unreliable.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Lights/signaling carried for low light, fog, crossings, or delayed return.
Complete	Checklist Item
<input type="checkbox"/>	Review route, pace, stops, hazards, hand/paddle signals, whistle signals, capsize plan, and emergency communication chain.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Scout rapids, obstructions, blind bends, surf zones, crossings, or unfamiliar hazards; portage if a clear safe line is not visible or skill is insufficient.
<input type="checkbox"/>	One craft at a time through constrained hazards; keep upstream of swimmers/boats when possible; feet up and pointed downstream if swimming in current.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Avoid strainers and low-head dams from upstream and downstream; never stand in fast current where foot entrapment is possible.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Takeout head count complete; shore contact notified trip is over.

Sources used: U.S. Coast Guard Recreational Boating Statistics 2024; USCG Float Plan guidance; NASBLA Safer Paddling Series and Paddlesports Dashboards; supplied Paddling Safety materials.