

Life Jackets

by Katy Jordan



A lot of people like to spend time on the water in boats, but every year, about twenty people drown in boating accidents in New Zealand. Many of these people might have been saved if they had been wearing life jackets.

The history of life jackets

For thousands of years, people have used things to help them float in water. Long ago, they filled animal skins with air to help them cross deep rivers. People also saw that wood floated, so if they held on to a piece of wood, they would float, too. Many sailors saved themselves by doing this when their ships sank. Then some sailors started wearing blocks of **cork** to help them keep safe if they fell into the sea.

Cork life jackets

In 1854, Captain John Ward invented a life jacket using small pieces of cork sewn together. The cork life jacket was good at keeping people afloat, but it was not very comfortable to wear. Also, cork is very hard, so people wearing cork life jackets sometimes broke bones when they fell or jumped into the sea.



A man wearing a cork life jacket

Cork

Cork is the very light bark from a type of oak tree. These days, it is most often used to put in the top of bottles or to make mats and floor tiles.



Kapok life jackets

To solve the problems with cork life jackets, people tried making life jackets filled with **kapok**.

Kapok

Kapok is a soft material from around the seeds of the kapok tree, which grows in tropical rainforests. Kapok is also used as a filling for things such as pillows, mattresses, and soft toys.



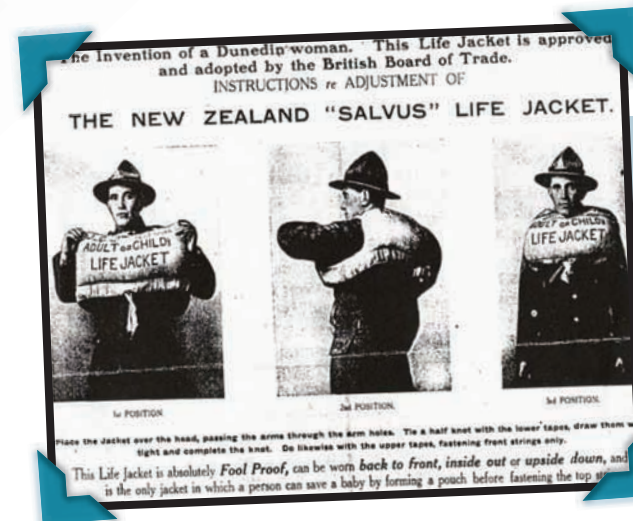
Kapok filling



One type of kapok life jacket was invented by a New Zealand woman, Orpheus Newman.

In 1912, Orpheus Newman's brother drowned at sea. The same year, over 1,500 people died when a huge passenger ship called *Titanic* sank. These two events made Orpheus want to invent a better life jacket.

In 1918, the British navy began using the life jacket that she invented, and it became popular around the world. However, if a kapok life jacket was in the water for a long time, the kapok could get wet and heavy.



An advertisement for the life jacket invented by Orpheus Newman

Orpheus Newman's great-granddaughter wearing one of her great-grandmother's life jackets



Inflatable life jackets

During the 1920s, an American named Peter Markus invented a better life jacket that could be inflated (puffed up with gas). Inflatable life jackets saved many lives during the Second World War.



New Zealand soldiers wearing inflatable life jackets

Synthetic foam life jackets

In the 1960s, people began using **synthetic foam** to make life jackets. These new life jackets were lighter, stronger, and more waterproof.

Synthetic foam

Synthetic foam is made using chemicals. (“Synthetic” means that it isn’t found in nature.) Synthetic foam is often used for packaging. The foam is full of small bubbles of air, so it floats easily.



Modern life jackets

People have continued to find ways to improve life jackets and make them safer and more reliable. Today there are two main types of life jackets:

- inflatable life jackets
- life jackets made from synthetic foam.



Most modern life jackets are yellow or bright orange so they are easy to see in the water. They are much more comfortable than the older life jackets because they are made from very light materials. When you are wearing a modern life jacket, you can still move easily.

How a life jacket can save you

A life jacket:

- helps you float and keeps your head above the water
- helps keep you warm in cold water
- makes you easier to see.



Keeping safe in a life jacket

Life jackets aren't all the same size. You need one that fits well and won't come off. Life jackets for children have extra buckles and straps to make sure that they stay on.

Some people think, "I'm OK because I have a life jacket on my boat. I'll put it on later if I need it." But most boat accidents happen suddenly. You can't grab a life jacket once you're in the water!

So remember, if you're on a boat, wear a life jacket at all times and make sure your friends and family do, too.



Life jackets for dogs

Some people like to take their pets with them when they go out on a boat. Although most dogs can swim well, they still get tired if they are in the water for a long time. Some shops sell special life jackets for dogs.



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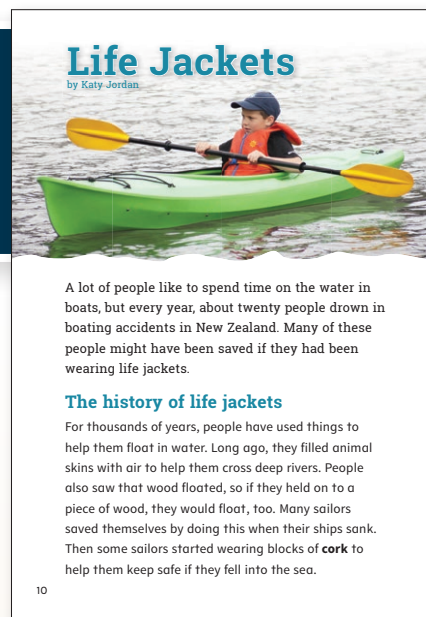
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