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– *Another "Boat Responsibly!" Reminder from the United States Coast Guard* –

For Boaters, establishing a “Hazard Zone” can avoid horrific Prop Strikes

A whirling cutting machine, spinning at 3200 rpm, able to inflict 160 impacts in a second. Sound like the diabolical weapon of a movie villain? Think again – it's the three-blade propeller on your boat.

Propeller injuries can be easily prevented. Although injuries from boat propellers are uncommon, the results of a prop strike are so horrific that it's worth setting some strict rules for passengers and operators alike.

How Accidents Happen

Children and other passengers love to dangle their legs over the side as a boat speeds through the water. They think it's fun and exciting. Maybe so, but it's also illegal, and extremely dangerous.

Passengers riding with legs over the side can easily slip, fall in the water, and be struck by a moving propeller. This is particularly true in a pontoon-type boat, where the pontoons "funnel" a passenger who slips off the front of the deck directly into the propeller blades.

For these reasons "bowriding" as well as riding on a seatback, gunwale (side), transom (rear), or swim platform while the boat is moving at greater than 5 miles per hour may be considered negligent operation and, in some cases, grossly negligent operation. A propeller can continue to spin after an engine is put into neutral, or even for some time after it is turned off, posing a hazard for swimmers, skiers, and tubers.

The Hazard Zone

One way to prevent accidents is to establish a "hazard zone" that includes the bow, gunwales, stern, and swim platform, as well as the water 30 feet behind and all round the boat. Then make a hard-and-fast rule: No one goes in the hazard zone until the motor is off, the boat has stopped moving, the keys are removed, and the operator has counted to ten.

Before starting the motor, do a headcount to make sure all passengers are safely inside the boat. Assign a responsible adult or adults to keep track of the whereabouts and safety of each child on board.

From the helm, it's often difficult to see swimmers in the water near the propeller. Go to the stern and look in the water near the propeller yourself, or appoint a lookout to do so before inserting the key in the ignition lock.

Don't forget that the passengers of other boats also need to be kept away from your propeller. Stay out of designated swimming zones and take particular care in congested areas or near boats that are towing skiers or tubers.

Well Equipped

The safety-conscious boater may want to consider some of the practical new devices designed to help prevent propeller strikes. These include wireless cut-off switches, propeller guards, ringed propellers, alternative propulsion systems, interlocks, sensors, and anti-feedback steering.

No equipment, however, can substitute for taking care and keeping a lookout. Keep passengers out of the hazard zone whenever the key is in the ignition lock, and you'll be well down the track to preventing horrific propeller injuries.

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The U.S. Coast Guard reminds all boaters to "Boat Responsibly!" For more tips on boating safety, visit www.USCGboating.org.