

[Six Things To Do When Your Boat Is Sinking](#)

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Guest contributor Vincent Pica shares the top reasons that boats sink and what to do if it happens to you

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U.S. Coast Guard Photo by Lt. Frank Wolfe

Why do boats sink at sea?

Before we get into the why's and wherefore's of sinkings, the single most reported reason is water coming aboard from the stern through the out-board engine cut-out. So, be extremely cautious about taking a boat so configured onto the high seas. A following sea can easily "poop" you from behind and overwhelm your capacity to off-load the water (see [Skippering in Heavy Seas.](#))

As to the other reasons, roughly 1 in 5 sinkings at sea (18%) are due to direct leaks in the vessel, not caused by violent contact with the bottom or the sea itself. Areas of ingress, in order, are:

1. *through-hull fittings that give way,*
2. *stuffing box leaks (the spot under the boat where the drive shaft exits the engine space of a cruiser and enters the water),*
3. *knot-meter plugs,*
4. *bait well discharge back-ups*

Roughly 1 in 8 sinkings at sea (12%) are caused by raw (sea) water cooling and exhaust systems failures. These parts, subjected to high heat from engine exhaust gases and the corrosive effects of salt water, simply wear out – and you are now pumping water from the sea into the engine spaces...

Hitting something, often rocks, accounts for another 10%. This is called "holing the boat", i.e., you just put a hole in it...

Roughly 1 in 20 sinkings at sea (6%) are caused by excess force/excessive speed and the hull comes apart...

(Editor's note: The 45 ft sailboat in the above photo was taking on water this past Friday, November 26, about 90 miles off of the Outer Banks, North Carolina, in 12-foot seas. The two men onboard were rescued by the USCG and [reportedly](#) did not know the source of the flooding..)

What to do when the boat starts taking on water

Here are the most important things you can do once you notice water where it doesn't belong...

1. Put Your Life Jackets On – Right away, direct everyone to don their life jackets.

2. Don't Be Bashful – Immediately get on the radio and call the USCG. Tell them where you are, how many people are aboard and where the water is coming from. Why how many people? Because if they get there after the boat goes down, make sure they pick up everybody. No one gets left behind.

3. Stop the Leak – If water is coming through a hole in the hull, try to stop it. Jam towels, cushions, extra life-jackets – anything – into the hole. Brace the plug with a shoulder only if you have to (you want to avoid having anybody below when the boat sinks...). Use a spar, oar, bimini cover pole, boarding ladder – anything – to jam your plug(s) into that hole. You won't stop the water but you will likely slow it. You may have to slow down to contain the water pressure on your plug so you are doing a trade-off here – less water but more time to shore. Start with less water and evaluate who is winning – you or the sea. An old sail boater's trick is to jam a sail into the hole from the outside. Let the sea pressure work for you. Not a lot of power boaters carry sails on their Bayliner – but it may give you an idea.

4. Trim the Boat – If you hit something, it is likely that the hole is in the forward part of the boat and possibly near the water line. Trim the boat up and try to get the hole out of the water. If you can, you win and the sea loses.

5. Any Port in a Storm – If you are losing the battle after doing everything above, beach the boat if you can. Who cares what happens to the boat at this point. We might be talking about living or dying now. Life first, property last.

6. Create a Ditch Bag – If the situation continues to deteriorate, say your prayers but don't leave the boat until it sinks out from under you. But have a "ditch bag" ready – cell phone, handheld radio, fresh water, dry clothes, medical kit, flash light, flares, etc – come immediately to mind. It is always good to have a ditch bag ready whenever you go "outside".

When you have a leak in your boat, secure the crew, call for help and try to stop the leak... You're the captain.

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