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SHOW: Dateline

DATE: July 31, 1998

LIFE SAVERS?

Announcer: From our studios in New York, here is Jane Pauley.

JANE PAULEY: With summer in full swing, and swimming and boating the favorite pastimes, chances are you're thinking about safety as well as pleasure. But before you head out to the beach, lake or pool, you'll want to hear our next report, because you and your loved ones may be going out with a sense of security that is not only false but potentially deadly. Here's Steve Daniels with a DATELINE Consumer Alert.

STEVE DANIELS reporting: (Voiceover) We've all heard the saying, "what you don't know can't hurt you." But when it comes to life vests, what you don't know can hurt you, maybe even kill you.

(Life Savers? graphic; boat on water; people boating; waves on water)

Mr. DARRYL DUELL: Most vivid memory of--of that day is myself--I pulled my brother out of the water. And the last thing I saw my brother do was strap that life preserver on and--and--and tighten the buckles.

DANIELS: (Voiceover) Doug Duell was 37 years old and an excellent swimmer. He was riding a Sea-Doo like this one, on Lake Mead, Nevada. His brother, Darryl, noticed the personal watercraft had stopped. And after several minutes, Doug was found floating face down in the water.

(Photo of Doug Duell; person riding personal watercraft; sign for Lake Mead; Darryl Duell walking by water; water)

DANIELS: Did you stop and ask yourself, 'How could Doug drown while wearing a life vest?'

Mr. DUELL: I--I said that the minute we found out he was in the water. I asked my friend, I said, 'He cannot drown wearing a life vest, can he?' My friend says, 'I don't think so.'

DANIELS: (Voiceover) Doug's body was recovered, showing no signs of severe

injury or trauma. Cause of death--"asphyxia due to drowning."

(Photo of Doug Duell; reports on Doug Duell's death)

Mr. DUELL: (Voiceover) He fell face first into the water and he drowned.

(Photo of Doug Duell)

Mr. DUELL: The medical examiner could not pinpoint the cause of death, other than he drowned.

DANIELS: DATELINE has discovered Doug Duell is not alone. Boaters all across the country are not getting the information they need about the life vests they're wearing. And they're putting themselves at risk by using those vests in sea conditions the vests can't handle. We've also learned the Coast Guard stamp of approval may be giving consumers a false sense of security.

(Voiceover) As you'll see later, some of the most popular types of Coast Guard-approved life vests on the market don't keep your head and face out of the water in rough conditions. And they can float you face down if you are unconscious, leaving potentially millions of people at risk.

(Lifeguards wearing life vests in wave pool; lifeguard Alicia waving hands as if to signal for help; lifeguard James floating face down in water)

Mr. WAYNE WILLIAMS: I'm absolutely certain that a lot of people have drowned in these devices, could be drowning today, will be drowning next week.

DANIELS: (Voiceover) Wayne Williams is a retired Air Force officer. He started the Air Force Sea Survival School in 1962. He's also been on a Coast Guard Marine Safety Advisory Committee. For years, Williams pushed the Coast Guard to provide better information to boaters who are carrying life vests that won't save them in a time of need.

(Wayne Williams walking by water; Williams speaking to Daniels; United States Coast Guard Headquarters sign; bow of boat on water)

Mr. WILLIAMS: What they're donning in the face of poor weather and rough sea conditions are calm-weather, calm-water devices. It's a--basically a dangerous and a silly situation.

Mr. DAVID HASSELHOFF: (Television Public Service Announcement) Each year more than 700 people die...

DANIELS: (Voiceover) For three years, the Coast Guard has had an ambitious campaign to get boaters to wear life vests, also known as personal flotation devices, or PFDs.

(Excerpts from Coast Guard public service announcements)

Unidentified Woman: (Television Public Service Announcement) But in real life, nine out of 10 drowning victims could have been saved if they had only worn a life jacket.

DANIELS: (V) And the Coast Guard campaign has paid off. Even though there are more people boating, fewer people are drowning. Statistics show the number of reported drownings has been reduced by nearly one third.

(Coast Guard water safety pamphlets; people boating; people riding personal watercraft; graphic showing number of reported drownings with a PFD over time)

DANIELS: How did they do that? Well, in the 1970s, the Coast Guard developed a more comfortable life vest it believed more people would wear. At the time, these were the choices--this one, which boaters complained was big and bulky and uncomfortable, and this one, which is lighter-weight but still restrictive. So this is what was introduced. It's lighter weight, and you can see it would be more comfortable. And now, two decades later, this is the choice for millions of American consumers for their boating activities.

Mr. SAM WEHR: To get a more wearable life jacket, a more comfortable life jacket, we made some trade-offs.

DANIELS: (Voiceover) Sam Wehr is in charge of life vest approval at the United States Coast Guard in Washington. He says the Coast Guard made a difficult decision in approving the more comfortable life vest, because, as you'll see later, safety compromises had to be made for comfort.

(US Coast Guard Headquarters building; Coast Guard flag; Sam Wehr in interview with Daniels)

Mr. WEHR: Making a life jacket comfortable enough to wear has a favorable impact on the overall number of lives saved. We get more lives saved if we can get more people to wear PFDs, or life jackets.

Mr. WILLIAMS: The logic was, 'If everybody wears flotation, we'll save lives. Within that, we'll save more lives than we lose.' They made a for-the-greater-good decision.

DANIELS: What's wrong with that?

Mr. WILLIAMS: Nothing wrong with that, so long as the public was informed as to what they could expect from that device.

DANIELS: (Voiceover) But what the public may not know is the modified, more comfortable life vests, known as type IIIs, aren't designed to keep your head and face out of the water in rough conditions. And they won't turn you face up if you've been knocked unconscious, say, waterskiing or jetskiing. Coast Guard statistics do show people across the country are dying while wearing all kinds of life vests--a total of 115 children and adults in 1996 and 133 in 1997. Of course, not all of the drownings can be attributed to shortcomings of the life vests the victims were wearing. Some of the deaths resulted from trauma, hypothermia and other injuries.

(Man trying on type III life vest in store; choppy water; man riding personal watercraft; Coast Guard reports; text excerpts from report; rocky point in water; large waves)

TEXT:

1996 FATALITIES 115

1997 FATALITIES 133

DANIELS: (Voiceover) But even the Coast Guard acknowledges many people have died wearing type III life vests--some, like Doug Duell, who may have survived had his life vest turned him face up and others who unknowingly rely on the type III in rough conditions. You may see the Coast Guard stamp of approval and think the life vest is suitable for rough conditions. But that's not always true. The type III vest, for example, is only considered a "flotation aid," for use in calm water where help is nearby. Yet the Coast Guard requires nothing more for boats going into rough water. So many people use the type III vests in conditions they should not.

(Life vests in store; photo of Doug Duell; boat on water; Coast Guard stamp of approval label; rough water; men paddling kayaks; boats on water; boy wearing type III vest)

DANIELS: The Coast Guard allows people to have PFDs on their boat that you admit aren't suitable for rough conditions. That seems contradictory.

Mr. WEHR: It does, I suppose, if you don't look at the overall problem that we're trying to solve. The largest number of fatalities happen in circumstances where type IIIs are perfectly suitable. And if we can get people to wear type IIIs in those circumstances, we'll be much further ahead in terms of drowning prevention.

DANIELS: (Voiceover) But, how are you supposed to know what the right circumstances are for a type III vest? That information isn't required to be on the vest. It's in this Think Safe pamphlet. The Coast Guard requires that it be attached to every life vest sold. The pamphlet does provide detailed information about the advantages and disadvantages of each type of life vest. But the Coast Guard told us very often boaters don't even read it.

(Waves on water; Think Safe safety pamphlet on life vest; man looking at life vest in store)

DANIELS: Does that concern you that you're depending on the pamphlet to get the information across, yet you admit people aren't reading it?

Mr. WEHR: It concerns me that boaters aren't as well-informed as they should be.

DANIELS: If people aren't reading the pamphlet, should that information, that critical information, be on the label itself?

Mr. WEHR: We considered that a number of years ago, and came to the conclusion that it shouldn't be. And the reason is that you can't adequately explain these trade-offs that I've been talking about earlier, on a short label.

DANIELS: (Voiceover) But a lot of people disagree and say boaters would be safer if, in addition to the pamphlets, warnings were on the labels, so consumers would have the information all of the time--like when they're on a friend's boat, borrowing a life vest. Not just at the time of purchase. Very few manufacturers put any performance information on the label because the Coast Guard does not require it.

(People in sailboat; Coast Guard seal of approval label on life vest; people in boat; man ringing up purchase at cash register)

Mr. WILLIAMS: What we need is a good, basic label on every device, that tells you everything about the device you're looking at and even compares it to others. It's ridiculous not to have a completely labeled safety device.

DANIELS: (Voiceover) If you're like many consumers, you may not have read the Think Safe pamphlet and you may not know everything you should about the life vests you're using. So we asked marine safety expert Wayne Williams to show us how the different types of life vests perform, in this wave pool. These are only two-foot waves, much like what you might encounter on a calm day on the water. Lifeguards James and Alicia wore the vests.

This is a type I life vest. It's big and bulky and not the choice of most boaters. But look how effectively the type I life vest keeps James' head and face out of the water. And the type I life vest will turn an unconscious person face up most of the time.

This is a type II life vest. It's also uncomfortable and not a popular choice for boaters because it goes around the neck. As you can see, the type II does a pretty good job of keeping Alicia's head and face out of the water, and sometimes the type II will turn you face up. But when James motioned for help wearing the type II life vest, his face did go under water.

And this is the type III life vest--the modified more comfortable vest developed by the Coast Guard in the 1970s in its effort to get more people to wear them. Remember, this is the most popular vest in use today. On their backs, James and Alicia floated well, but on when they went face down, the type III did not turn them face up. At other times, James was immersed by almost every wave. And when waving for help, they both went well under water.

(Life preservers with affixed Think Safe pamphlets; scrolling text in pamphlet; Williams; James and Alicia jumping into wave pool while wearing life vests; boat on water; James and Alicia in water; type I live vest; James floating while wearing type I life vest; type II life vest; Alicia floating in type II vest; James motioning for help in type II vest as face goes under water; type III life vest; James and Alicia wearing type III vests; James and Alicia floating on backs in type III vests; lifeguards floating face down in type III vests; James being immersed by waves; Alicia and James being immersed while waving for help)

DANIELS: If you're frustrated with the choices--if the type I and type II are too bulky, and the type III doesn't provide enough protection--you should know there are some new alternatives--inflatable life vests similar to what you've seen on airplanes for years. But they can be expensive--up to three times more

expensive than some other life vests. But boating and sporting groups say they offer both comfort and safety.

(Voiceover) There are two kinds of inflatable vests. This is the manual inflatable, which is Coast Guard-approved. It inflates by hand in the water and brings Alicia to the surface and floats her on her back. And this is an automatic inflatable, which deploys within seconds of hitting the water. It also brings James to the surface quickly. The automatic inflatable is available in stores, but is still awaiting a stamp of approval because the Coast Guard is concerned about its reliability. No matter which life vest you choose, safety advocate Wayne Williams says consumers should demand better labeling, so every consumer will know what they're getting and how it works.

(Williams assisting Alicia with inflatable vest; Alicia jumping into water and inflating vest; Alicia floating to surface; James donning automatic inflatable vest; James jumping into water and floating to surface; life vests in store; Williams in interview with Daniels)

Mr. WILLIAMS: We need improved education, we need improved labeling, we need vastly improved devices. All of that is within our reach. It's simply a matter of doing it.

PAULEY: Here's what the Personal Flotation Device Manufacturers Association says--its focus is to make safe products that people will use. And that no one PFD can work in all water conditions. Everyone agrees the most important thing is to wear your life vest, because any vest will increase your odds of survival. And be aware that each life vest performs differently, depending on your body type.

Announcer: Still ahead--the magic of animation, using people, not pencils.

Mr. CARLOS ALICE ROCKY: (Making cartoon) I smell success. Yes, I do.

Announcer: How they did it in a DATELINE State of the Art.

Also, if allergies are making you miserable now, you may be hoping you outgrow them.

Unidentified Man: Sure you can outgrow your allergies, yeah, and I feel like I have.

Announcer: But is that true, or just an allergy myth. Find out in our DATELINE Healthline.

(Announcements)