

Keeping a watch – guidance for crew on fishing vessels

This guidance is for workers who crew fishing vessels. It describes practical steps you can take to stay safe when you are on watch. It also explains your duties and obligations under the law.

Key points

- When you are on watch, the safety of everyone on the vessel is in your hands.
 - People have died and been injured when no-one was keeping watch properly.
 - You must keep a lookout for the entire time you are on watch by using your sight, hearing, and the navigational equipment.
 - You must be trained in watchkeeping before you go on watch.
 - If you are worried about you, or someone else, not being able to keep a watch properly, tell the skipper.
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Your duties as a watchkeeper

When you are on watch your main duties are to:

1. Avoid collisions with other vessels or objects in the sea
2. Keep the vessel on track
3. Manage the vessel (for example, by keeping records in the logbook)
4. Monitor the vessel's systems and seaworthiness.

Keeping a good watch is critically important. Your focus is to keep watch without being asked or expected to do anything else. Even if the skipper is in the wheelhouse and you have the watch, you have a duty to keep the watch until the next person has confirmed that they have taken over the watch from you.



What the law says

Maritime Rule 22.5 says that:

“Every vessel must at all times maintain a proper lookout by sight and hearing as well as by all available means appropriate in the prevailing circumstances and conditions.”

This means:

At all times – during the day, during the night, when travelling to and from fishing grounds, fishing, while at anchor, or drifting.

Proper lookout by sight and hearing as well as by all means available – using your eyes, ears, **and** the navigational equipment to keep track of where the vessel is and if there is any risk of collision. Using one method is not enough.

In the prevailing circumstances and conditions – thinking about the conditions, for example, the weather, visibility, and how close other vessels are.

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act:

As a worker, you must take reasonable care of your own health and safety, and take reasonable care that your actions do not cause harm to yourself or others. For example, turning up fit for work, taking reasonable care of your own safety, and considering the health and safety of your workmates and other people on the vessel.

You must also comply with any reasonable instructions, and cooperate with any reasonable policies or procedures from the skipper or maritime operator about how to work in a healthy and safe way.¹

What can go wrong?

Failure to maintain a proper watch can have catastrophic consequences for your vessel, crew, and others. The risk of injury to you or other people, or damage to the vessel or other vessels, is strongly linked to watchkeeping practices. Risks can arise from:

- falling asleep or being too tired to stay alert
- getting distracted or bored
- relying on the navigational equipment to keep watch for you
- the conditions you are working in – the weather, visibility, and other vessels close by
- not keeping an eye on the state and stability of the vessel, or checking the machinery
- poor communication
- not enough training.

The business (the maritime operator or skipper) you work for must provide you with a work environment where risks to your health and safety are properly controlled.² They must involve you and the rest of the crew when identifying and assessing risks, and making decisions about how to eliminate or minimise the risks and choosing appropriate control measures.³

¹ Section 45 of the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015.

² WorkSafe, 2017, 'Worker Rights and Obligations': www.worksafe.govt.nz/managing-health-and-safety/workers/your-rights-and-obligations/

³ Under section 58 of the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015.

Example

On the vessel the skipper and crew reviewed the watchkeeping procedures as part of their routine Maritime Transport Operator Plan reviews. They looked at how to make sure everyone keeps a good watch all the time. They all agreed that particularly at night when alone in the wheelhouse, everyone should leave their phones in their bunk so they are not distracted. Monitoring all the navigation gear, keeping a good eye out the windows, and being focused, are key to staying safe.

What you can do

Below are some suggestions for practical things you can do to fulfil your duties under the law and keep yourself and everyone else on board healthy and safe when you are on watch.

Things you can do (control measures)

Stay alert and focused on the job

In a demanding job like fishing, there is always a risk of getting tired. Sometimes being on watch can get boring if you are steaming for a long time in open water. Have some strategies for managing fatigue and boredom to reduce the chance of harm or damage - to you, other people, and the vessel - while you are on watch.

- Rest between trips. Make good use of your break before you get back on the vessel.
- When you start your watch, check the watch alarm is set and the skipper has the key.
- Stay active – if you are moving about you are less likely to fall asleep or lose concentration.
- Keep water and snacks with you – staying hydrated helps stay alert.
- If you are too tired, distracted, or feel for any reason like you cannot keep the watch, tell the skipper.
- Leave your phone, and any other devices that could distract you, out of the wheelhouse.

Use all available means

When you are on watch you must use all available means to keep a lookout. This means using your sight, hearing, **and** the navigational equipment in the vessel. It is important to keep a close watch on the vessel – most groundings happen when the person on watch is not monitoring the vessel properly and thinks it is in safe water.⁴

- Do not rely on the equipment to keep the vessel on track and avoid collisions. Equipment is not a replacement for using your sight and hearing to keep a lookout. Sometimes the equipment can fail.
- Use more than one method to get your position, for example, regularly fix your position visually then verify it on the radar.
- Regularly go outside and scan round the vessel with binoculars.
- Check the radio in the wheelhouse is on and tuned to channel 16 to listen for changing weather.
- Listen for sounds that are different or unusual.
- Regularly check the navigational equipment and lights are working.
- Regularly check the water depth under the vessel using the depth sounder.
- Make sure you know the lights and shapes of different signals so you know what other vessels are doing.
- Make sure the lights on your vessel are on and in the correct configuration for your situation so that other vessels can see what you are doing.

⁴ Maritime and Coastguard Agency 2006 'Keeping a safe navigational watch on fishing vessels'.

- Monitor your progress on paper charts as well as on the plotter.

Think about the conditions

It is likely that you will be out in conditions where there are other vessels close by. Sometimes visibility might be poor or the weather might be bad. All of these things can mean there is an increased risk of collision or grounding, so keeping a good watch is critical.

- Think about how many vessels are nearby, how far away they are, and how much space you need to safely turn, stop, or move your vessel keeping well clear, especially if all the fishing gear is out.
- Do not assume another vessel will give way to you or keep clear. Relying on another vessel to give way can be dangerous. Pay attention to what other vessels are doing and slow down or take appropriate action if you think there is a risk of collision, for example, by altering course. If you are not sure what to do, or need some help, call the skipper.
- Use the proximity alert on the radar if visibility is poor.

Regularly check the vessel's systems and seaworthiness

It is really important to keep an eye on the state of the boat while you are on watch. Engines can shut down, like generators or freezer units. Worst case scenario, fires can start and ships can take on water.

- Monitor the alarms, lights, cameras and gauges in the wheelhouse while you are on watch.
- Pay attention to how the vessel feels, for example: "does it sit low?", "is it listing?", "is it moving strangely or does it feel odd?" All of these could be signs of the vessel taking on water.
- Be aware of any unusual sounds or smells that could indicate something is wrong, for example, smoke.
- Check the operational machinery and engines from time to time to make sure they are operating correctly, for example, ice-making machines. It is important to only check the interior spaces if someone else is awake and can keep watch from the wheelhouse, for example, once you have handed over.

Communicate: keep records and do a proper handover

Keeping good notes about what happened during your watch is important so the next person on the roster knows what to expect and if there is anything they need to deal with.

- Use the logbook to keep a record of how long you were on watch for, when you changed over and who you handed over to.
- Keep records of what happened during the watch, for example, any incidents, sea or weather conditions, or other information you think the next person needs to know. When you handover, make sure you pass this information on to the next person on watch. Tell them the vessel's current position and the vessel's intended track.
- Make sure you understand the night orders and standing orders that the skipper has left, and ask if you are not sure about anything.
- Make sure you know what to do in the event of an emergency or if you need assistance from the skipper while you are on watch. If you are unsure about something, for example, the lights on another vessel, seek immediate assistance from the skipper.
- Do not leave the wheelhouse until you have confirmed with the next person that they have taken over the watch.

If you are worried for any reason about whether you, or someone else, can keep watch, or you are not sure what to do, tell the skipper. If the skipper is out of earshot, use the intercom. All skippers are happy for this to happen - anytime.

Your health and safety rights

There are some things the business you work for must do under the law.⁵ They must:

- make sure that any risks to your health and safety are properly controlled, and provide (so far as is reasonably practicable) a safe work environment
- provide you with enough training, information and support to be able to do your job safely - this includes training on watchkeeping practices and procedures if you are going to go on watch⁶
- provide safe systems of work, for example, clear watchkeeping procedures and standing orders.

You have a right to stop work if you believe it is unhealthy or unsafe.⁷ For more information about your rights and obligations, and other things your business must do, see:

<https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/managing-health-and-safety/workers/your-rights-and-obligations/>

More information

[Managing fatigue](#)

Disclaimer

This publication provides general guidance on your duties under relevant legislation (including the Maritime Transport Act 1994, Maritime Rules and the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015), but are not a substitute for the rules and legislation. It is not possible for Maritime New Zealand to address every situation that could occur at

⁵ Under section 36 of the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. Also see: <https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/managing-health-and-safety/workers/your-rights-and-obligations/>

⁶ Health and Safety at Work (General Risk and Workplace Management) Regulations 2016 Regulation 9

⁷ Under section 83 of the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. See also: Worksafe, 2017: '[Worker Rights and Obligations](#)'.

work, and it is your obligation to make sure you are operating to the latest Maritime Rules and other legislation and to obtain legal advice where appropriate. This means that you need to think about this guidance and how best to apply it to your particular circumstances. Maritime New Zealand regularly reviews and revises guidance to make sure that it is up-to-date and reflects any changes in legislation, but you cannot rely on this guidance for currency. Please check maritimenz.govt.nz/rules/ to confirm that you are referring to the current version of this publication.

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