

U.S. Coast Guard  
Office of Navigation Safety and Waterway Services  
Washington DC 20593-0001

CONSUMER FACT SHEET

## CELLULAR TELEPHONES ON BOATS

The Coast Guard does not advocate cellular phones as a substitute for the regular maritime radio distress and safety systems recognized by the Federal Communications Commission and the International Radio Regulations -- particularly VHF maritime radio. However, cellular phones can have a place on board as an added measure of safety.

## CELLULAR PHONE LIMITATIONS IN AN EMERGENCY

- o Cellular phones generally cannot provide ship to ship safety communications or communications with rescue vessels. If you make a distress call on a cellular phone, only the one party you call will be able to hear you.
- o Most cellular phones are designed for a land-based service. Their coverage offshore is limited, and may change without notice.
- o Locating a cellular caller is hard to do. If you don't know precisely where you are, the Coast Guard will have difficulty finding your location on the water.

Note: In some areas, however, cellular providers have established a special code (\*CG) which, if you are in range, will connect you directly to a Coast Guard Operations Center. This service may only work with the carrier to which you have subscribed.

## CELLULAR/VHF MARINE RADIO COMPARISON

Cellular phones do provide the convenience of simple, easy-to-use, inexpensive, private and generally reliable telephone service to home, office, automobile or other locations. Placing a shore-to-ship call to someone with a cellular telephone is especially convenient. However, you cannot use your cellular phone outside the United States, and you may need a special agreement with your carrier to use it outside that carrier's local service area.

VHF marine radios were designed with safety in mind. If you are in distress, calls can be received not only by the Coast Guard but by ships which may be in position to give immediate assistance. A VHF marine radio also helps ensure that storm warnings and other urgent marine information broadcasts are received. The Coast Guard announces these broadcasts on VHF channel 16. Timely receipt of such information may save your life. Additionally, your VHF marine radio can be used anywhere in the United States or around the world.

On VHF radios, however, conversations are not private and individual boats cannot be assigned a personal phone number. If you are expecting a call, channel 16 or the marine operator's working channel must be continually monitored.

## SHOULD YOU RELY ON A CELLULAR PHONE EXCLUSIVELY?

Actually there is no comparison between cellular phones and VHF marine radio. They normally provide different services. The cellular phone is best used for what it is, an on board telephone -- a link with shore based telephones. A VHF marine radio is intended for communication with other ships or marine installations -- and a powerful ally in time of emergency.

If you have a portable or hand held cellular telephone, by all means take it aboard. If you are boating very far off shore, a cellular phone is no substitute for a VHF radio. But, if you are within cellular range, it may provide an additional means of communication.

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