



Power-operated watertight doors can be deadly

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Watertight doors are critical safety barriers, designed to maintain a vessel's stability and buoyancy in the event of flooding. However, their power and closing speed can pose a serious threat to crew members, especially when procedures are misunderstood, ignored, or bypassed.

Investigations into accidents reveal a clear pattern:

- Crew members often attempt to pass through doors before they are fully open, sometimes while carrying items that prevent safe operation of control levers.
- In some cases, the master mode switch on the bridge is left in “DOORS CLOSED” mode following drills, causing doors to close automatically and unexpectedly when the local handle is released.
- Audible alarms and warning signals may go unnoticed in high-noise environments, and posted instructions are sometimes unclear or not easily visible.
- Technical inspections have identified cases where doors close faster than regulations allow.

The consequences can be catastrophic. Crew members have suffered severe injuries, including crushed limbs, and there have also been fatalities when crew have been caught in closing doors. In a recent case handled by Gard, a crew member lost their life after being trapped by a sliding watertight door.

An additional aspect is that on most vessels there is a safer alternative route available, but to save time, crew will sometimes take the shorter route through power operated watertight doors, increasing the risk of accidents.

Key recommendations

- Always open watertight doors fully before passing through. Never attempt to squeeze through a moving door.
- Keep both hands free to operate the controls on each side of the door. Avoid carrying heavy loads that compromise your ability to control the door safely.
- Be acutely aware of the master mode switch setting. In “DOORS CLOSED” mode, doors will close automatically if the handle is released, and the risk of injury is greatly increased.
- Treat audible alarms and warning lights with respect. They signal real danger.
- Ensure all crew are properly trained in the daily operation and emergency procedures for watertight doors and participate in regular drills.
- Maintain doors and control systems in accordance with manufacturer's instructions, and ensure operating instructions are clearly posted and visible at every door.

Further guidance and resources

Gard's dedicated [safety campaign page](#) offers videos, downloadable materials, expert webinars and case studies. These resources highlight risks and best practices through real-life examples and technical guidance. Crew and managers are encouraged to review and share these materials during safety meetings.

[Watertight doors awareness](#)

Regulatory updates

Recent amendments to SOLAS regulations (notably II-1/22) limit the number of watertight doors permitted to remain open during navigation, with stricter requirements for remote closing, audible alarms, and clear indication systems.

In 2024, the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) issued an [updated guidance note](#), specifically addressing accidents involving power-operated watertight doors. This guidance emphasizes the importance of strict adherence to operational procedures, enhanced crew training, and regular maintenance to prevent injuries and fatalities.

Additional requirements under the IMO Polar Code further reinforce the importance of maintaining watertight integrity in harsh and icy environments.

Port State Control and shelf state inspections increasingly focus on the operational status and maintenance of watertight doors, with findings of missing gaskets, faulty alarms, and improper procedures leading to non-compliance.

The IMO and industry bodies urge operators to go beyond minimum compliance, and to embed a proactive safety culture and to ensure that watertight doors are treated as safety-critical equipment, regularly tested, maintained, and supported by effective crew training.

For more information, visit our dedicated [Watertight doors awareness page](#).