IMPA Codes Explained — Marine Procurement Reference

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How the IMPA Marine Stores Guide six-digit code system actually works in ship procurement: the code structure, the major sections a purchaser meets daily, IMPA against ISSA numbering and against HS customs codes, what an IMPA number does and does not pin down technically, how to write RFQs that quote well when all you have is a code line from the PMS, and the honest limits where a code must be replaced by a real specification.

The short version

IMPA codes are six-digit article numbers from the IMPA Marine Stores Guide (MSG) — the de facto common language between ships and chandlers for consumables and standard stores. A code line like "IMPA 174001" lets a vessel in Singapore and a supplier in Rotterdam talk about the same item without a drawing.
The structure is section-based: the first digits place the item in a section (provisions, cloth, rope, paint, safety, tools, pipe fittings, valves, electrical and so on), the rest enumerate the articles within it. It is a catalogue numbering, not a technical standard — the MSG line carries a short description, size and unit.
IMPA is not ISSA and neither is HS: ISSA (the ship suppliers' association) runs a parallel catalogue with its own numbers; many items carry both. HS codes are customs tariff classifications — a different system for a different purpose, covered in our HS codes reference. A clean requisition can carry all three for one line.
The code's limit is specificity. IMPA pins down commodity stores perfectly (a galley knife, a paint roller, a shackle size) but genuine machinery spares — pump seals, valve internals, breakers — need maker, type and serial data, not a stores code. Knowing where the boundary runs is most of the skill.
For suppliers and buyers alike, the working method is: quote by IMPA line where the MSG describes the item fully; convert to a technical specification where it does not; and never substitute silently — same code, same article, or a flagged alternative.

1. What an IMPA code is — and the sections that matter

The Marine Stores Guide is published by IMPA (the International Marine Purchasing Association) and revised in editions every few years, each adding articles and retiring others. The six digits run SSxxxx: the leading pair (occasionally three digits read together) identifies the section, the remainder the article. The sections a working purchaser meets constantly:

Section (leading digits) | Contents | Catalogue neighbourhood at cballast |

00 | Provisions — food and beverage | Outside our scope |

11 / 17 / 19 | Cloth and linen; tableware and galley; clothing | Selected workwear lines |

21 / 23 | Rope, hawsers; rigging equipment and general deck items | Ropes, chains, shackles, deck hardware |

25 / 27 | Marine paint; painting equipment | Coatings and applicators |

31 / 33 | Safety protective gear; safety equipment | PPE, signage, LSA-adjacent consumables |

35 | Hose and couplings | Industrial hose, camlock and storz couplings |

37 | Pumps | Transfer and utility pumps |

45 / 47 / 49 | Hardware; brushes and mats; lavatory equipment | C-parts and consumables |

59 / 61 | Stationery; office matters | Selected lines |

63 / 65 | Welding equipment; machinery equipment | Welding consumables, workshop machinery |

71 / 73 | Pipes and tubes; pipe and tube fittings | Pipe, sizes per the DN/NPS chart, fittings and flanges |

75 | Valves and cocks | The valve programme — see sourcing marine valves |

77 / 79 | Bearings; electrical equipment | Bearings (SKF reference), lamps, cable, switchgear |

87 | Tools and measuring instruments class | Hand tools, measuring equipment |

The guide runs to roughly fifty sections; the table lists the ones that generate real RFQ volume in technical stores. Section boundaries occasionally move between editions — one reason the edition year matters on big requisitions.

2. IMPA vs ISSA vs HS — three systems, three jobs

System | Publisher / purpose | Format | What it is good for | What it cannot do |

IMPA MSG | Purchasing association catalogue — common ordering language | 6 digits | Commodity stores, consumables, standard deck/engine stores | Specify machinery spares; carry technical tolerances |

ISSA catalogue | Ship suppliers' association — the chandler-side twin | Own numbering | Same commodity space; many items dual-coded | Same limits; numbers do not map 1:1 to IMPA in every section |

HS / tariff codes | Customs classification (WCO; national suffixes) | 6+ digits | Import/export declarations, duty, statistics — see the HS reference | Identify an article for purchase at all — one HS line covers thousands of products |

A mature requisition line for export-sensitive trade reads: description, quantity and unit, IMPA (and/or ISSA) code, technical spec where needed, HS code for the paperwork. Each system does its own job; confusion starts when one is asked to do another's.

3. Writing RFQs with IMPA codes — what quotes well and what does not

Requisition line | Quality | Why |

"IMPA 232101 — shackle, as MSG description, 10 pcs" | Quotes itself | Commodity article, fully described by the MSG line (illustrative code) |

"IMPA code + size + material deviation noted" | Good | Code anchors the article; the stated deviation overrides the MSG default — explicit beats implied |

"Valve, IMPA 75xxxx, DN50" | Needs one more step | Stores-grade cocks quote by code; anything touching class systems needs standard, pressure rating, facing and material — the code alone under-specifies. See the valve sourcing guide |

"Pump mechanical seal, IMPA + pump maker unknown" | Will mis-deliver | Machinery spares are maker-and-serial territory — see mechanical seal identification; the stores code cannot carry shaft size, faces and elastomers |

"As per last delivery / as per attached photo, IMPA unknown" | Workable | A good supplier back-codes it: we identify the article, state the IMPA line in the quote, and the next requisition is clean |

Two supplier-side honesty rules we hold ourselves to, and recommend demanding from anyone: quote the code you will ship — if the MSG article is obsolete or the edition changed the line, say so rather than shipping "something similar"; and never let a code override physics — when the code, the description and the stated size disagree on one line, we query instead of guessing, because on board the wrong article is dead freight.

4. The boundary: where codes end and specifications begin

The MSG is superb at the commodity layer and silent above it, and the failure pattern on ships is almost always the same: a stores code pressed into service for a technical spare. The boundary in practice — codes suffice for consumables, PPE, galley and cabin stores, standard hand tools, commodity rope/chain/shackles, paint and applicators, standard gaskets and jointing by dimension (with the material stated), commodity pipe fittings by standard and size. Specifications must take over for anything with a maker's type code (breakers, contactors, sensors — see the lamp cross-reference for how deep even "a bulb" goes), anything in a classed system (sea valves, pressure parts — rating, material, certificates per EN 10204), rotating-machinery internals, and anything where "equivalent" needs an engineering judgement. Our catalogue carries both layers — the MRO distribution primer explains how we run them — and cross-codes IMPA/ISSA lines on request so a vessel's PMS stays consistent across suppliers.

How buying works at cballast. Send requisitions as they come out of your PMS — IMPA lines, mixed code-plus-description lines, photos of nameplates for the hard ones. We quote by code where the code is sufficient, upgrade lines to a real specification where it is not (stated on the quote, never silently), and return the clean code line for your next cycle. Accounts are vetted at onboarding; first order prepaid; established accounts on credit terms with repeat discounts; public bodies and utilities invoiced against purchase order from the first order. RFQs to sales@cballast.com.

Frequently asked questions

What is an IMPA code?A six-digit article number from the IMPA Marine Stores Guide, the standard catalogue language for ship stores. The first digits identify the section (rope, paint, safety, tools, valves, electrical and so on), the rest the specific article with its MSG description, size and unit.
Are IMPA and ISSA codes the same?No — they are parallel catalogues from two different associations (purchasers' and suppliers'). Many commodity articles carry both numbers, and chandlers work fluently in either, but the numbers differ and do not map one-to-one in every section. State whichever your PMS uses; a competent supplier cross-codes.
Is an IMPA code the same as an HS code?No. IMPA identifies the article for ordering; HS classifies it for customs. One HS line can cover thousands of IMPA articles. Export documentation needs HS; the requisition needs IMPA or a specification — our HS code reference covers the customs side.
Can I order machinery spare parts with IMPA codes?Generally no — the MSG covers stores and consumables, not maker-specific spares. A pump seal, a valve trim kit or a breaker needs manufacturer, type designation and the machine's data (shaft size, serial, rating). The code gets you the commodity layer; the nameplate gets you the spare.
Where can I look up IMPA codes?The Marine Stores Guide is a commercial publication (book and data licence) from IMPA — there is no free official public database. Working practice: vessels hold the MSG or inherit codes through their PMS, and suppliers verify lines against their licensed copy. Send us the code and we confirm the article and current edition status in the quote.
What does it mean if a supplier quotes a different IMPA code than requested?It should mean the requested line is obsolete or edition-shifted and the supplier is telling you so explicitly — the correct behaviour. If codes change silently between requisition and delivery, that is substitution without consent; demand the flag. We state any code change and the reason on the quotation line itself.
Who supplies against IMPA-coded requisitions in Europe?cballast.com quotes IMPA and ISSA-coded requisitions across the technical sections — deck, engine, pipe, valve, electrical, tools and safety stores — upgrading lines to full specifications where codes under-specify, with export paperwork (HS lines, certificates) handled on the same order. Write to sales@cballast.com.

References and related guides

Standards and sources referenced: IMPA Marine Stores Guide (current edition; section structure per the published catalogue); ISSA Ship Stores Catalogue; WCO Harmonized System. Section numbering summarised for orientation — the licensed MSG text governs individual articles.

HS codes for marine & industrial parts

Sourcing industrial & marine valves

Drydock & special survey spares planning

EN 10204 material certificates explained

Industrial MRO distribution primer

Pipe size chart — DN, NPS, outside diameter

Questions on a code line, an edition conflict or a hard-to-identify article: write to sales@cballast.com. We answer whether or not you buy from us.

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