

Fire Extinguisher Essentials

Small fires grow into big fires in seconds. There is only a small window of opportunity when a fire extinguisher is effective. Knowing how to select, inspect, and operate the extinguisher, is critical to saving property and potentially even lives.

When purchasing fire extinguishers, work with the vendor to select the proper class and size extinguishers for the hazards present in your work area. The type of fire fuel will determine the class of fire extinguisher to be chosen.



Class A – Ordinary Combustibles

The pictogram indicates a trash can and campfire on fire. A common way to remember this is ordinary combustibles leave **ASHES** when they burn.

Examples include paper, cardboard, wood, plastics, clothing, and vegetation.



Class B – Flammable and Combustible Liquids

The pictogram indicates an old-time gas can and a pool of liquid on fire. A common way to remember this is liquids have a **BOILING** point.

Examples include gasoline, kerosene, paints & thinners, and cooking grease.



Class C – Energized Electrical Equipment

The pictogram indicates an electric cord and plug on fire. Two common ways to remember this are **ELECTRIC**.

Examples include computers, televisions, electric stoves, and battery packs.

One strategy to match the fire extinguisher to multiple hazards, such as in many workplaces and homes, is to purchase an A-B-C (multi-class) fire extinguisher. In most office or home settings, select a 5 or 6 pound A-B-C extinguisher. For industrial settings or garages, consider a 10 pound extinguisher.

Inspection and maintenance is critical to ensure the extinguisher will work when needed. The following are some maintenance procedures necessary to insure that a portable fire extinguisher will operate as intended when needed:

Monthly Inspection

Every 30 days, each fire extinguisher should be given a visual inspection or "quick check" to be sure that it is accessible and will operate. Verify that the extinguisher is in its designated location and accessible, has not been operated or tampered with, and has not incurred any obvious physical damage. This does not require an engineer or fire inspector – it can be done by a building owner, occupant or a designated and educated representative.

This bulletin is intended for general information purposes only. It should not be construed as legal advice or legal opinion regarding any specific or factual situation. Always follow your organization's policies and procedures as presented by your manager or supervisor. For further information regarding this bulletin, contact your Safety Director at 877.398.3046.

Annual Maintenance

Every year extinguishers must be examined by a New Jersey certified fire extinguisher vendor. The examination should include weighing the extinguisher and checking for defects that would not be identified during the monthly quick check. For example, the pressurized extinguisher must be periodically pressure-tested (hydrostatic) to ensure the structural integrity of the shell. Or that the powder has not become caked from being under pressure for a number of years.

Most home fire extinguishers have a 10 year life. Manufacturers either stamp or label the date of manufacture on the body of the extinguisher. The label should also include the expiration date.

Recharging

If the extinguisher has been used, never return it to its position. Even a momentary blast of the extinguishing agent will allow the pressurizing gas to leak, rendering the extinguisher useless. The used unit should be turned in and a spare extinguisher put in its place under a certified vendor can recharge the extinguisher.

Operating a Fire Extinguisher

Most individuals will never have the need to operate a fire extinguisher during an emergency. However, if the need does arise, remember the word 'PASS'



Pull the pin

Pull the pin from the valve handle. There is a seal holding in the pin which must be broken. If the pin is difficult to pull straight out, use the finger hole on the pin to twist the pin, breaking the seal.



Aim at the base of the fire

Hold the extinguisher in one hand by the handle, and use the other hand to hold the nozzle of the hose. Aim the nozzle at the base of the flames, where the flames meet the fuel source. Do not aim at the top of the dancing flames.



Squeeze the handle / trigger of the extinguisher

Most extinguishers are discharged by squeezing the handles on the top of the extinguisher. If the extinguisher is too heavy, the user can rest the extinguisher on the floor and lean on the top handle of the extinguisher to start the discharge.



Sweep the extinguishing agent across the surface of the fuel

Move the hand holding the nozzle, back and forth across the width of the flames. Start at the edge of the flame closest to you and 'push' the flames off the fuel. This is similar to using a garden hose to wash down a driveway.

The MEL Media Library has several online, VHS, and DVD fire extinguisher videos to enhance your fire extinguisher training. Many fire extinguisher service companies offer live-fire extinguisher training at your facility.