Picking the Right Fire Extinguisher

Safety Talk

What's at Stake?

Fire extinguishers are not a one type fits all piece of equipment. Different types of fire extinguishers are filled with different kinds of extinguishing agents designed to put out a specific type of fire or fires.

While operating a fire extinguisher is simple, in an emergency, even the simplest of tasks become difficult and if you accidentally choose the wrong type of extinguisher you put yourself and others in danger.

What's the Danger?

Using the wrong type of extinguisher to fight a fire can cause the fire to grow rapidly, cause an explosion, create a hazardous atmosphere, or lead to shock and electrocution.

A water extinguisher used on electrical or oil fires may cause electric shock or explosion.

A Type B or C carbon dioxide extinguisher used on a chemical fire may cause violent explosions

How to Protect Yourself

Choosing the correct type of fire extinguisher for the fire you are trying to put out is key.

Fires are classified by the type of fuel they use, in other words, what's burning.

1. Class A fires are wood, paper, cloth, trash, and other ordinary materials.

2. Class B fires are fueled by gasoline, oil, paint, and other flammable liquids.
3. Class C fires are started from an electrical source, they are commonly called electrical fires.
4. Class D fires occur when combustible metals burn.
5. Class K are commonly called kitchen fires because they start when vegetable or animal oils and fats burn.

Ask your supervisor if you are not sure what kind of fire extinguishers you have in your work area. The following list is a guide to the different classes of extinguishers and the types of fires they put out.

1. Class A Fire Extinguishers – put out paper, wood, rubber, cloth, and plastics fires.
2. Class B Fire Extinguishers – put out fires caused by flammable liquids including grease, oil, gasoline, and oil based paints.
3. Class C Fire Extinguishers – put out electrical fires from circuit breaker panels, energized equipment, computers, and other electrical equipment.
4. Class D Fire Extinguishers – should be used fires fueled by flammable metals.
5. Class K Fire Extinguishers – put out fires from vegetable oils, animal oils, and other fats used for cooking. Used in commercial kitchens and restaurants with deep fat fryers.

Multipurpose Extinguishers – Some fire extinguishers are marked A-B-C or “multipurpose.” These combination extinguishers may contain either a dry chemical or an inert gas and may be used on all three classes of fires.

Final Word

Learning the ABCD’s and K’s of fire extinguisher safety and knowing how to operate a fire extinguisher can help you protect yourself and others when a small fire breaks out.