When to Use a Fire Extinguisher: 3 P’s Before You PASS

Safety Talk

In a heroic attempt to extinguish an apartment fire, two men working in a residential building found extinguishers in a hallway and raced to the unit. Although they had just rescued a tenant from the same unit, they were both overcome by thick smoke and died of cardiac arrest.

WHAT’S AT STAKE
Fire extinguishers can be found in many facilities and often save lives and property. But fires double in size every 60 seconds, so choosing to use an extinguisher incorrectly or at the wrong time can quickly kill or injure you.

Today we’ll review what decisions to make before using an extinguisher and how to use an extinguisher effectively.

WHAT’S THE DANGER
There’s a reason humans warn each other to be careful near fires. Fires can quickly kill or seriously injure us in many ways, for example:

- Smoke inhalation, causing asphyxiation and death
- Severe skin and internal burns
- Structural collapse, causing crushing or striking deaths and injuries

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF
What’s the first thing to do if you discover a fire? Notify others to leave the building or area, following the organization’s emergency exit procedures. If you don’t remember or don’t know the emergency exit procedures, ask your supervisor today. You should also pull the nearest fire alarm, call 911, or otherwise

contact the fire department or your organization's fire brigade. Remember, fire doubles in size every 60 seconds, so it's crucial to act fast.

Next, if you aren't trained and authorized to attempt extinguishing a fire, you should leave the building immediately along with others.

If you are trained and authorized to extinguish a fire, the fire appears small, and there's an extinguisher nearby that you feel is safe to use, quickly consider 3 P's before using it:

1. Path: Can you get to a safe exit without passing through any fire, smoke, or heat?
2. Proper: Do you have the proper extinguisher for the type of fire you're facing?
3. Pressure: If the extinguisher has a pressure indicator, is the pressure reading in the correctly charged range?

If you answer YES to all 3 P's, and you do not feel your safety is in danger, you can attempt using the extinguisher. When it's time to use an extinguisher, remember the "P-A-S-S" technique:

P ull the pin: Pull the pin; remove the breakable seal, if it's there, and pull the pin.

A im the nozzle: Aim the nozzle, at the base of the flame. If you can safely manage, stand about 10 to 20 feet from the fire. Most importantly, never put yourself in danger. The contents of an extinguisher are under pressure and if you're too close to the fire, you may spread it. In a Class B fire—one with flammable liquid—instead of aiming directly at the base, you want the extinguishing agent to settle on the flame from above. Aiming straight at the bottom of a flammable liquid fire could spread the liquid and make the fire worse.

S queeze the handle: Squeeze and hold the handle. You should have about 10-20 seconds of material.

S weep from side to side: Sweep from side to side to allow the extinguishing agent to evenly cover the fire.

If at any time conditions change, for example your exit path is threatened by smoke, leave immediately.

FINAL WORD

Your safety – and the safety of co-workers – is the top priority in a fire. If you answer NO or I DON’T KNOW to any of the 3 P’s, leave the building immediately. If you don’t remember the PASS technique, leave the building immediately. Getting home to family, friends, and co-workers is always a heroic act.