Proper Use of Portable Fire Extinguishers in the Workplace



A portable fire extinguisher is one of the most effective defenses that can be used to gain control of a fire. It is important that the person using the fire extinguisher is properly trained and able to correctly use the extinguisher.

Reaction time is from when the fire is discovered, to the time when a person uses the fire extinguisher to extinguish the fire. In order to reduce the reaction time and improve the chances of extinguishing the fire, it is important for the worker to know where the fire extinguishers are located and how to properly use them.

Many fires spread out of control because workers simply do not know how to use fire extinguishers or because they have used the wrong type of extinguishers. Fire extinguishers that are broken, empty, missing, or out-of-service, are of no use in an emergency.

When a worker wastes time in trying to locate a fire extinguisher or does not know how to use it, a small fire can rapidly become a larger fire and cause extensive damage.

EXTINGUISHER CLASS

Fire extinguishers are classified into different types. Specific letters and symbols are on the side of the fire extinguishers denote the type of fire they are designed to extinguish. Fires can occur from different ignition sources in the workplace and it is important that the correct extinguisher is used.

A	**Class A *(with a green triangle)* should be used on ordinary combustibles such as wood, cloth, paper, rubber, and many plastics. The extinguisher must be placed within 75 feet of workers.**	**B**	**Class B (with red square) should be used on flammable liquids such as gasoline, oil, grease, tar, oil-based paint, or lacquer and must be placed within 50 feet of workers.**
C	**Class C (with a blue circle) should be used on energized electrical equipment such as wiring, fuse boxes, circuit breakers, machinery, or appliances. Class C fire extinguishers are also rated for Class A and B fires as well.**	**D**	**Class D (with a yellow star) should be kept around areas where solid materials such as magnesium, phosphorous, or other types of combustible metals are used. Class D extinguishers should be stored within 75 feet of workers.**
K	**Class K should be kept around cooking appliances or in areas where combustible cooking oils such as lard or animal fat are used. Class K extinguishers are required to be placed within 30 feet of the cooking area.**	**Note: A slash through any of the symbols means, the extinguisher can’t be used on that class of fire.**	

EMPLOYER RESPONSIBILITY

All employers must have portable fire extinguishers in the workplace and it is a Cal/OSHA requirement that workers are trained and familiarized on exactly how to use them in the event of a fire. Such training programs must educate workers about where the fire extinguishers are stored, proper use, and the hazards of fighting fires. Workers must be trained what to do if they are not able to extinguish the fire and educated as to when emergency personnel should be called.

A portable fire extinguisher intended for employee use must meet specific Cal/OSHA requirements and be selected and kept in the workplace based on the anticipated types of fires that could occur. Seasoned fire-fighting personnel from local fire departments often offer free educational programs and can help employers choose the correct number and type of fire extinguishers for their workplaces.

EXTINGUISHER USE

Only workers who have been trained to use a portable fire extinguisher should be authorized to do so.

The employee operating the fire extinguisher should keep his/ her back to a clear exit and stand six to eight feet away from the fire while holding the extinguisher.

The National Fire Protection Association recommends the following P.A.S.S. Technique for extinguishing a fire with a portable fire extinguisher.

- Pull out the removable pin that secures the handle or lever.
- Aim the extinguisher nozzle at the base of the fire.
- Squeeze the handle to discharge the extinguishing agent onto the fire.
- Sweep the hose or nozzle from side to side, while aiming and spreading the extinguishing agent material across the entire base of the fire.

Once the fire is out, the employee should back away from the area, watching for any fire reignition. If reignition occurs, the employee should continue spraying the extinguishing agent onto the fire, until the extinguisher is empty. If the flames cannot be extinguished, the area should be quickly evacuated and emergency personnel should be called by dialing “911.”