

Fire Extinguishers

USFA recommends that only those trained in the proper use and maintenance of fire extinguishers consider using them when appropriate.

The use of a fire extinguisher in the hands of a trained adult can be a life and property saving tool. However, a majority of adults have not had fire extinguisher training and may not know how and when to use them. Fire extinguisher use requires a sound decision making process and training on their proper use and maintenance.

Should I Use a Fire Extinguisher?

Consider the following three questions before purchasing or using a fire extinguisher to control a fire:

1. What type of fire extinguisher is needed?

Different types of fires require different types of extinguishers. For example, a grease fire and an electrical fire require the use of different extinguishing agents to be effective and safely put the fire out.

Basically, there are five different types of extinguishing agents. Most fire extinguishers display symbols to show the kind of fire on which they are to be used.



Types of Fire Extinguishers



Class A extinguishers put out fires in ordinary combustibles such as cloth, wood, rubber, paper, and many plastics.



Ordinary
Combustibles



Class B extinguishers are used on fires involving flammable liquids, such as grease, gasoline, oil, and oil-based paints.



Flammable
Liquids



Class C extinguishers are suitable for use on fires involving appliances, tools, or other equipment that is electrically energized or plugged in.



Electrical
Equipment



Class D extinguishers are designed for use on flammable metals and are often specific for the type of metal in question. These are typically found only in factories working with these metals.



Combustible
Metals



Class K fire extinguishers are intended for use on fires that involve vegetable oils, animal oils, or fats in cooking appliances. These extinguishers are generally found in commercial kitchens, such as those found in restaurants, cafeterias, and caterers. Class K extinguishers are now finding their way into the residential market for use in kitchens.



Combustible
Cooking

There are also multi-purpose fire extinguishers - such as those labeled "B-C" or "A-B-C" - that can be used on two or more of the above type fires.

2. Is the fire at a point where it might still be controlled by a fire extinguisher?

Portable fire extinguishers are valuable for immediate use on small fires. They contain a limited amount of extinguishing material and need to be properly used so that this material is not wasted. For example, when a pan initially catches fire, it may be safe to turn off the burner, place a lid on the pan, and use an extinguisher. By the time the fire has spread, however, these actions will not be adequate. **Only trained firefighters can safely extinguish such fires.**

Use a fire extinguisher only if:

- You have alerted other occupants and someone has called the fire department;
- The fire is small and contained to a single object, such as a wastebasket;
- You are safe from the toxic smoke produced by the fire;
- You have a means of escape identified and the fire is not between you and the escape route; and
- Your instincts tell you that it is safe to use an extinguisher.

If *all* of these conditions are not present, you should NOT try to use a fire extinguisher. Alert other occupants, leave the building following your [home escape plan](#), go to the agreed upon meeting place, and call the fire department from a cell phone or a neighbor's home.

3. Am I physically capable of using the extinguisher?

Some people have physical limitations that might diminish or eliminate their ability to properly use a fire extinguisher. People with disabilities, older adults, or children may find that an extinguisher is too heavy to handle or it may be too difficult for them to exert the necessary pressure to operate the extinguisher.

Maintenance

Fire extinguishers need to be regularly checked to ensure that:

- The extinguisher is not blocked by furniture, doorways, or any thing that might limit access in an emergency.
- The pressure is at the recommended level. Some extinguishers have gauges that indicate when the pressure is too high or too low.
- All parts are operable and not damaged or restricted in any way. Make sure hoses and nozzles are free of insects or debris. There should not be any signs of damage or abuse, such as dents or rust, on the extinguisher.
- The outside of the extinguisher is clean. Remove any oil or grease that might accumulate on the exterior.

Additionally:

- Shake dry chemical extinguishers once a month to prevent the powder from settling or packing. Check the manufacturer's recommendations.
- Pressure test the extinguisher (a process called hydrostatic testing) after a number of years to ensure that the cylinder is safe to use. Find out from the owner's manual, the label, or the manufacturer when an extinguisher may need this type of testing.
- Immediately replace the extinguisher if it needs recharging or is damaged in any way.

Sound Decision Making. Training. Maintenance.

All are required to safely control a fire with an extinguisher. For this reason, **USFA recommends that only those trained in the proper use and maintenance of fire extinguishers consider using them when appropriate.** Contact your local fire department for information on training in your area.