



Easy as

Learning to properly use a fire extinguisher can mean the difference between life and death

By Kyle W. Morrison

You're cooking a stir-fry in your wok when the cooking oil suddenly catches fire – do you know what to do?

Nearly 375,000 residential building fires are reported each year, according to the U.S. Fire Administration. Half of these fires are considered “confined,” which means they are smaller, do not spread and are limited to, say, a cooking pot.

The other half of reported fires are “non-confined” – blazes that spread beyond a limited area. The vast majority of the annual 2,600 fire deaths and 13,000 fire injuries occur in these “non-confined fires,” the USFA states.

Proper use of a fire extinguisher on a small fire can help save lives by preventing the fire from growing larger. Here are some things to remember about the selection, use and storage of fire extinguishers.

Please note: Extinguishers should only be used for small fires, such as a fire in a pan or waste can. A fire can spread quickly and in minutes may grow so large that a fire extinguisher is not adequate. Only trained firefighters can properly and safely extinguish such a blaze. Additionally, consider visiting your local fire department to receive hands-on training in the proper use of fire extinguishers.



Selection and use

Not all fire extinguishers will work well on every type of fire. Fires are identified by classes based on the materials involved in the fire, and fire extinguishers have labels noting which class of fire they can put out.

Class A fire extinguishers are used on combustible materials. **Class B** extinguishers are used on flammable liquids. **Class C** extinguishers are used on electrical equipment. (See box for more information.)

However, some fire extinguishers may be used on more than one type of fire. An extinguisher labeled B-C could be used on both grease fires and toaster fires. An extinguisher labeled A-B-C could be used on most home fires, according to the USFA.

The Electrical Safety Foundation International recommends buying a multi-purpose extinguisher large enough to be effective in putting out small fires and light enough to handle without much difficulty.

Before using an extinguisher on a fire, alert other people in the area and have someone call the fire department. Don't use an extinguisher if a lot of smoke is in the room or if your instincts are telling you it would not be safe to do so, the USFA warns. In these situations, evacuate the building and wait for trained firefighters to put out the blaze.

When you decide it is safe to use a fire extinguisher, take precautions to

identify an escape route and ensure the fire is not blocking it, the USFA advises.

People should remember "PASS" to safely use fire extinguishers, according to the National Fire Protection Association:

- **P**ull the pin while holding the extinguisher's nozzle away from you and release the locking mechanism.
- **A**im low, pointing the extinguisher's nozzle at the base of the fire.
- **S**queeze the extinguisher's lever slowly and evenly.
- **S**weep the nozzle from side to side.

Maintenance and storage

Store fire extinguishers near room exits so you can easily escape if the flames grow out of control or the room fills with smoke, the ESFI suggests. Also, make sure access to the

extinguisher is not blocked during an emergency, the USFA states. The National Safety Council recommends keeping an extinguisher near the furnace, garage and anywhere else a fire may start, including the kitchen. Regularly check the pressure gauge on the extinguisher to make sure it is at the recommended level. Extinguishers with gauges indicate when the pressure is too high or too low, according to the USFA. Check the extinguisher to ensure all the parts are undamaged and the nozzles are free of insects or other debris, as well as for signs of damage such as dents or rust, the USFA added.

Any extinguisher found to be damaged or needing recharging should be immediately replaced, the USFA stresses. **FS&H**

Fire extinguisher classes

Common home fire extinguisher classes and what type of fire they put out:

A **CLASS A** – fires involving ordinary combustible materials, such as cloth, wood, paper and rubber

B **CLASS B** – flammable liquid fires, including those caused by grease, gasoline and oil

C **CLASS C** – fires involving appliances, tools or other electrical equipment

Two other classes are less common in the home:

D **CLASS D** – for use on flammable metals; often found only in factories

K **CLASS K** – intended for fires involving vegetable oils, animal oils or fats in cooking appliances. Until recently, these extinguishers were only found in commercial kitchens, but are now becoming more common for home kitchens.

Source: U.S. Fire Administration