



Does your company have a fire extinguisher? If so, what type of extinguisher is it and when was the last time it was serviced? There are few people that will know that information off the top of their heads, so a better question would be; where is your fire extinguisher and do you know how to use it. Every business is supposed to have some sort of fire protection device, but when was the last time you took the time to familiarize yourself with what to do? This month's Safety Alert is a guide that you can use to help improve your workplace fire plan.

OSHA's Fire Extinguisher Standards: What Every Business Owner Should Know

Fire extinguishers may be rated by the types of fires they're suited to extinguish (e.g., Class ABC extinguishers or Class K extinguishers). These ratings are based on the common system of categorizing different types of fires by classes, which include:

Class A fires involve ordinary materials like burning paper, lumber, cardboard, plastics, etc.

Class B fires involve flammable or combustible liquids such as gasoline, kerosene, and common organic solvents used in a laboratory.

Class C fires involve energized electrical equipment, such as appliances, switches, panel boxes, power tools, hot plates, and stirrers. (It's important to note that water can be a dangerous extinguishing medium for Class C fires because of the risk of electrical shock—unless a specialized water mist extinguisher is used.)

Class D fires involve combustible metals, such as magnesium, titanium, potassium, and sodium, as well as pyrophoric organometallic reagents such as alkyllithiums, grignards, and diethylzinc. These materials burn at high temperatures and will react violently with water, air, or other chemicals. **Extreme caution is needed when battling Class D fires!**

Class K fires are kitchen fires. This class was added to the NFPA portable extinguishers Standard 10 in 1998.

OSHA's Requirements for Fire Extinguishers

OSHA requires that all employers, regardless of their business's size or industry, provide portable fire extinguishers throughout their facility. The specific requirements depend on the size and occupancy of the workplace. In addition, employers must "mount, locate, and identify" the extinguishers to ensure they are easy for employees to access during an emergency.

Here are some key OSHA requirements to keep in mind.

1. Use only **approved fire extinguishers** in a designated place. The employer is responsible for the inspection, maintenance, and testing of all extinguishers.
2. To determine the number and placement of extinguishers, employers must take into account the **maximum distance** an employee will travel to access an extinguisher.
3. OSHA determines **how often the employer must test each fire extinguisher**, and the training they are required to offer to employees.
4. The mounting requirements for portable fire extinguishers include:

- Keep the bottom of the extinguisher at least 4 inches above the ground.
- If the extinguisher weighs more than 40 pounds, the top should be no more than 3.5 feet from the ground.
- If it weighs less than 40 pounds, the top should be no more than 5 feet above the ground.

Why Is It Important to Know These Requirements?

Complying with OSHA's fire extinguisher requirements is essential for the safety of your employees and customers, as well as the local community and anyone who may visit your place of business. OSHA dictates that it is your responsibility as an employer to ensure the proper placement and maintenance of fire extinguishers, and to train employees on the proper use of those extinguishers. Perhaps most importantly, fire extinguishers can help prevent small fires from turning into large-scale disasters that threaten the lives and property of those in the vicinity.

Moreover, as a business owner, you have the legal responsibility to ensure that your workplace is safe for everyone who enters it. Failure to comply with OSHA requirements can result in hefty penalties and legal action against your business. Beyond the possibility of a serious disaster that can cause injuries and threaten people's lives, it's also crucial to stay informed about these requirements and take them seriously to avoid any potential legal or financial consequences for your business.

Fire Extinguisher Inspections

OSHA also dictates the required frequency of fire extinguisher inspections within your business and what these inspections should involve. For example, visual inspections must be conducted once a month to verify the placement and functioning of each extinguisher. You should also be conducting maintenance inspections every year with trained professionals, and more rigorous examinations may be required every 5 to 6 years, depending on the types of extinguishers used in your business. Other requirements include hydrostatic tests and providing replacement equipment to be used when extinguishers are not available due to maintenance, inspections, or other reasons.

Employee Training and Awareness

In addition to proper use of extinguishers, fire safety training for employees is a critical component of OSHA's requirements. Business owners should ensure that employees receive proper training on fire prevention, evacuation procedures, and the correct usage of fire extinguishers.

Training sessions should be conducted regularly, and all new employees should undergo comprehensive fire safety orientation. For this reason, you will need to develop some form of training schedule that considers new hires and regular training for existing employees. Equipping employees with the knowledge and skills necessary to respond effectively to fire emergencies not only protects their lives but also reduces the potential for panic and confusion during a crisis.

A fire is a disaster that can be disruptive and expensive for your business—but the consequences can be even worse, and may include injuries, serious property damage, and even loss of life. Fortunately, while fires may not always be avoidable, the worst consequences of a fire can be prevented by adhering to OSHA's requirements for small businesses. Simple steps—such as equipping your business with the proper number and type of fire extinguishers, maintaining and inspecting them regularly, and training employees—can make it possible to prevent small fires from turning into larger disasters.

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