

Fire Extinguishers

Portable fire extinguishers come in various types and sizes. Use the information below to determine what type of extinguisher you may need.

Depending on their intended use, portable fire extinguishers use various extinguishing agents - either water or chemicals are used to put out the fire. Independent testing labs test and rate fire extinguishers to determine the class and size of fire they can extinguish. Only buy an extinguisher bearing the label of an independent testing lab.



Fires are grouped into four basic categories designated as **Classes A, B, C and K.**

These describe the fire's fuel or, in other words, the material that is on fire.

Class A: Ordinary combustibles such as wood, cloth and paper.

Class B: Flammable liquids such as gasoline, oil and oil-based paint.

Class C: Energized electrical equipment such as wiring, fuse boxes, circuit breakers and appliances.

Class K: Fire in cooking appliances involving combustible cooking products such as vegetable or animal oils and fats.

Extinguisher Labels

Portable fire extinguishers that have been tested and approved will be labeled with the class or classes of fire they are suited to fight. There are two standard labeling systems.

The older labeling system uses simple icons with an A, B or C designation to show which class or classes of fire it is safe to use a given extinguisher to fight.

The newer labeling system uses standard pictorial symbols which show the class or classes of fire for which the extinguisher is suited. The symbols identify the type of fire the extinguisher can be used for.

Note: A red slash stroked through any of the fire classification symbols means it is unsafe to use that extinguisher on that class of fire. For example, a water-filled extinguisher would show the symbols for Class B and C fires slashed through as water should never be used to extinguish a flammable liquid or an electrical fire.

If a symbol is not shown on the extinguisher's label, it simply means the extinguisher was not tested for that class of fire.



A
Trash, Wood, Paper



B
Liquids, Grease



C
Electrical Equip.



K
Cooking Media

Extinguisher Size

Portable fire extinguishers that are A-and B-rated are also rated for the size of the fire they can be used on. Generally, when choosing a fire extinguisher, the bigger it is the better. The bigger the extinguisher, though, the heavier it is, too. Before you purchase an extinguisher, make sure you are able to both hold it and operate it.

Class A-or-B-rated extinguishers are labeled with a number relating to the extinguisher's firefighting effectiveness. The larger the number, the larger the fire the extinguisher is equipped to handle. For home use, most extinguishers have 1-A or 2-A ratings which cover Class A fires and ratings of 5-B, 10-B, 20-B or 40-B for Class B fires.

A typical rating might be 2A:10B:C for an A:B:C household fire extinguisher. No number is attached to the C rating indicating the fire size for which it is suited; the C rating is listed simply to show the extinguisher can be used on fires which involve energized electrical equipment. This type of fire will always involve either Class A combustibles or Class B flammables.

What to Buy

Most fire extinguishers sold for home use employ dry-chemical extinguishing agents and can be purchased at local hardware stores. These units, depending on the chemicals used, are labeled either B:C (which means they are rated for fighting flammable-liquid fires and fires involving energized electrical equipment), or A:B:C (which means they are multipurpose extinguishers rated for fighting all three common classes of fires). A K-rated extinguisher can be used on fires which involve cooking products such as oils and fats.

Multipurpose fire extinguishers are popular for household use and safe for use on all household fires. They are labeled with the symbols A, B and C.

Important: The extinguisher purchased must be suited for the fire it is being used on. Using the wrong type of extinguisher can put you in danger and make the fire worse, too.

Installation and Maintenance

The best place to mount a fire extinguisher is in plain sight high on a wall, within easy reach of adults. It should be mounted near an exit so the escape route is not blocked in case of fire. Close to heat sources or drapes is not a safe place to mount a fire extinguisher. Also unsuitable is directly above a kitchen stove, countertop appliance or anything else that is likely to catch fire.

The kitchen is the most important room in your home to have a fire extinguisher. The garage, workshop and near any room with a fireplace or open-flame heater are also excellent locations to have fire extinguishers mounted and ready for use in event of a fire.

Easy-to-use mounting hardware is standard with most fire extinguishers sold for home use. The attachment of the extinguisher to the bracket varies between models. Familiarize yourself with the fire extinguisher's release mechanism so that it can be easily and quickly detached in an emergency.

Recharging/Testing Your Extinguisher

Disposable fire extinguishers can only be used ONCE and are NOT rechargeable. Even if only partially discharged, a disposable fire extinguisher must be discarded and replaced.

Rechargeable fire extinguishers require testing and professional servicing according to the manufacturer's recommended schedule. Look in the Yellow Pages under "Fire Extinguishers" for service companies.

The contents (the extinguishing agent) of portable fire extinguishers are stored under pressure. All extinguishers come equipped with a dial-gauge or some type of pressure-testing mechanism, such as a test button. Fire extinguishers need to be checked at least once a month. If the pressure has dropped below the acceptable level, the fire extinguisher must be replaced or recharged immediately.

Fire extinguishers need to be inspected for dents, cracks, corrosion and any type of damage. If there is a hose or horn attached to the extinguisher's nozzle, make sure the rubber and plastic parts are intact.