

## FIRE SAFETY - FIGHT OR FLEE?

Fire is one of the most common types of emergencies that a company may encounter. A necessary decision in planning for this emergency situation is whether or not employees should fight a fire with a portable fire extinguisher. Small fires can often be extinguished by a well-trained employee with a fire extinguisher. However, to do this safely, the employee must understand the uses and limitations of a portable fire extinguisher and the hazards associated with fighting fires.

### Should employees evacuate or fight a small fire?

The choice to evacuate the workplace will most effectively minimize the potential of fire related injuries. In addition, employees who are trained to use and maintain portable fire extinguishers require considerable resources. On the other hand, you will want to consider the availability of a public fire department, the time it may take for them to respond, and the vulnerability of egress routes.

### Risk Assessment – When to fight a fire?

Fire extinguishers are not designed to fight a large or spreading fire. Even against small fires they **are only useful under the right** conditions. An extinguisher must be large enough for the fire at hand. It must be available and in working order, fully charged. And **it must be the correct class of extinguisher for the type of fire (i.e. don't use a water based extinguisher to fight a grease or electrical fire).**

Before fighting any fire with a portable fire extinguisher, the people involved must perform a risk assessment that evaluates the size of the fire, the evacuation route that the fire extinguisher users will use, and the atmosphere near the fire.

### Fire extinguishers should only be used if:

- The fire is small and confined to the immediate area where it started; such as in a wastebasket, cushion, small appliance, stove.
- The fire department has been called
- The operator has been properly trained to use a fire extinguisher
- The operator can fight the fire with their back to a safe escape route
- The extinguisher is rated for the type of fire you are fighting and is in good working order
- The operator has an assistant - no one should fight a fire alone

Remember, if there is the slightest doubt about whether to fight a fire:  
**DO NOT FIGHT IT!** Instead, get employees out of the area/building and close doors to slow the spread of the fire. Let the professional firefighters do their jobs.

## **Purchasing a Fire Extinguisher**

A fire extinguisher should be “labeled” and “listed” by an independent testing laboratory such as UL (Underwriters Laboratory). It should be rated for the type of exposure(s) anticipated. Class A is for ordinary combustible material such as paper and wood. Class B is for flammable or combustible liquids such as gasoline. Class C is for electrical fires. Class D is for combustible metals such as magnesium. Class K is for kitchens and is designed to fight fires from cooking oils and animal fats. The higher the rating number on an **A, B, C, D** or **K** fire extinguisher, the more fire it can put out.

## **Maintenance of Extinguishers**

Fire extinguishers must be recharged after every use.

Fire extinguishers need to be professionally serviced annually. If the annual service tag is missing the extinguisher must be reserviced.

Monthly documented visual checks are required. The visual check includes making sure extinguishers are located where they are supposed to be, gauge arrows are in the green (not over charged or under charged), annual service tags are in place, and plastic strips placed through the handles by the annual professional service company are in place.

Documentation can be done by signing the corresponding month on the back of the annual service tags or by keeping a log that identifies each extinguisher, its location, who inspected it and the date of inspection.