

How to Choose and Use Fire Extinguishers

A fire extinguisher can be a lifesaver. Placed near an exit, in an easy-to-grab spot, it can put out a small fire before the firefighters arrive, or at least suppress the flames while you escape. All household extinguishers are classified A, B, or C (or a combination of these) on the label to indicate which types of fires — ordinary combustibles, flammable liquids, or electrical—you can use them on. Many of the ones sold at home stores are classified A:B:C and fight all three types of fires. The main distinction among home extinguishers is size. In most cases bigger is better, but sometimes the biggest extinguishers are too heavy to maneuver. (The weight on an extinguisher refers to the amount of chemical inside; the canister adds several more pounds.) There's also a difference between rechargeable extinguishers, with metal valves, and disposable ones, which have plastic valves. A rechargeable one will cost more, but refilling it once the pressure gauge shows that use or time has depleted the contents is still less expensive than buying a new disposable one. The National Fire Protection Association (www.nfpa.org) recommends an extinguisher for each floor. But no matter how many you have, nothing can substitute for the most important safety tool: a fire plan. Make sure everyone in the family knows how to get out in a hurry, where to meet outside, and how to call 911. Even if you think you've put out the fire on your own, don't cancel that emergency call. Leave it to the pros to decide if it's really out.

Reading the Label

Every household extinguisher is labeled A, B, or C, which tells you the types of fires the extinguisher is effective against. A is ordinary combustibles like wood, paper, and cloth; B is flammable liquids, such as gasoline or cooking oil; and C is live electricity.

In the fine print on the label, these letters are preceded by numbers — for example, 3-A:40-B:C — which are the extinguisher's classification rating. The numbers, assigned by Underwriters Laboratories, tell the extinguisher's relative effectiveness against each type of fire, regardless of its weight or the chemical it uses. The higher the number, the greater the effectiveness (and likely the higher the price). So an extinguisher with a 4-A rating is more effective on ordinary combustibles than a 2-A one. The C designation carries no number; it just means the extinguisher's chemicals won't conduct electricity.

What Size Is Right?

10-pound

Best for: Garage or home workshop, where a fire might grow in size before being noticed.

Look for: Rechargeable model with hose for ease of use.

5-pound

Best for: Quick grab in the kitchen or laundry room.

Look for: Rechargeable model with hose for ease of use.

2-pound

Best for: Car.

Look for: Disposable model with mounting hardware to keep it from rolling around in the trunk.

Stove-top

Best for: Mounting on range hood over stove. (Do not use over deep fryers; released chemical can splash grease and spread flames.)

Look for: Magnetic pressurized cans designed to pop open from the heat of flames, spraying sodium bicarbonate (baking soda).

Using an Extinguisher

Fire safety experts advise you to learn how to use an extinguisher before an emergency arises. Check with your fire department to see if they offer homeowner training. Keep extinguishers where you can see and reach them easily, near the room's exit. That way you can fight the fire with your back to the door and make a quick escape if flames get out of control.

To help you remember how to use an extinguisher, use the acronym **PASS**:

Pull the extinguisher's safety pin.

Aim the chemical at the source of the flames rather than at the flames themselves, standing at least 6 feet from the fire (or as directed on the extinguisher's label).

Squeeze the trigger and hold it, keeping the extinguisher upright.

Sweep the source of the flames until the extinguisher runs dry.



Whenever you have used an extinguisher, whether or not it is completely empty, you must replace it or refill it right away. Same goes with any extinguisher whose pressure gauge slips out of the green zone into red over time. Fire extinguisher companies charge about \$15 to refill a typical 5-pound A:B:C extinguisher, provided it has a metal valve. Extinguishers with plastic valves are not refillable and should be discarded after use.

Staying Ready

A fire extinguisher can lose pressure over time, rendering it useless when you need it. But if you're the type who forgets to peek at your gauges periodically, consider this sensor system from MIJA, called EN-Gauge. It runs on a 9-volt battery and keeps track of the extinguisher's pressure. If the gauge gets low, it flashes a red light and sounds an alert, reminding you to get the extinguisher refilled. It also sounds an alert when the extinguisher has been pulled from the wall, as it would be during a fire. And like a smoke detector, the sensor beeps when the battery is low.

A more elaborate version can be wired to a house's security system; the alarm company gets a signal when the extinguisher is used and can, in turn, call 911. Cost is around \$200 for the stand-alone model or around \$100 per extinguisher for the security system model, not including fees and installation.