

Complete Health, Environmental, and Safety Services, Inc.
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Putting Out Fires, Part 2

We discussed what extinguishers you need last month. That was the easy part. The harder parts are making sure they're always ready to use – and, of course, using them correctly.

Your fire extinguisher supplier reminds you every year that you need to have the extinguishers inspected and pressure-checked. They also need to be checked each month, but you can easily do that yourself, or assign it to different people in your shop each month. Walk through your facility; make sure you can find and get to each extinguisher without having to look under boxes, reach around tires, or move things to get to the extinguisher. Is each one fully charged? Are the pins and tamper seals still there? If the pin's been pulled, the fire extinguisher may have been used. In that case, it won't provide a full charge when it's needed next. It'd be a pity (a disaster, even) if a small fire grew out of control just because of an empty extinguisher.

Your employees can prevent that fire from going out of control by putting it out when it is still small. But if they use fire extinguishers incorrectly, they can inadvertently let the fire spread and can even endanger themselves. If your employees haven't been trained on how and when to use fire extinguishers, have them evacuate immediately, even if it's a very small fire. It's much better to have a burned-out building than a burned employee. If you want them to extinguish that burning rag, you need to make sure they've been trained in correct fire extinguisher use.

There are several ways to provide the training. Your local fire department may do it for a small fee (or even for free; if they do, it'd be nice to make a donation). Fire extinguisher suppliers and safety consultants will do it. You can even get the training online for free, at www.fireextinguisher.com.

Fire extinguisher training doesn't only cover how to use the extinguisher. It also covers when not to use one. That's just as important.

The basic rules on when to use an extinguisher:

- The fire is still small and contained. Once the fire has started to spread, a fire extinguisher won't do the job. If the fire cannot be put out with one extinguisher, it's time to get out.
- You have an escape route. If the fire flares up, you need a way out. Maybe some people can walk through flames, but it sure isn't something I'd want to try. Don't try to fight a fire unless you have a clear route to safety.

- Everyone in the area has been alerted and 911 has been called. It takes time for people to evacuate and for the fire department to arrive. Getting out is more important than putting the fire out. So yell “Fire!” and get someone to call the fire department while you go for the extinguisher. If the fire’s out by the time the fire engines arrive, that’s okay; it gives the experts a chance to make sure the fire has been extinguished. And remember – some insurers aren’t keen on paying for fire damage if the fire department wasn’t called.

Once a fire has started spreading, a fire extinguisher won’t do the job. At that point, get everyone out. But have people stay on site, so you don’t lose track of them. You don’t want to send a firefighter into a burning building to rescue someone who’s relaxing at home.

When you need an extinguisher, you have only seconds to act. Fires can double in size in a minute. If you can’t get to the extinguisher, you’ve lost precious time. If the extinguisher doesn’t work, or you don’t use it correctly, you’ve lost time. Inspect your extinguishers each month, to make sure they’re where they should be, are accessible, and are fully charged. If a fire extinguisher is used, get it replaced right away. And most importantly, train your employees, each year, on safe use of fire extinguishers.

If you have questions about fire safety, fire extinguisher training, or other safety issues, contact CHESS at 651-481-9787; toll free at 877-481-9787, or carkey@chess-safety.com.