

The Importance of Fire Extinguishers

The association strongly encourages residents to keep at least one, and preferably several, fire extinguishers in your home. Fire extinguishers reduce the potential for damage which keeps insurance premiums down. Several types are available, and each has a specific use.

How Many?

Common household fire extinguishers are only intended to snuff out small fires before they become serious. Keep as many as necessary to grab quickly before a fire gets out of control. For starters, you should probably have one in the kitchen, at least one on each floor, one in the garage, and one near valuable electronic equipment.

What Type?

The kind of fire extinguisher you should use depends on what's burning. Different types of extinguishers are available for different types of fires, and each is prominently labeled with an alpha designation:

Class A fires: paper, wood, cardboard. If household items like cardboard, fabric, or wood (a sofa, for example) are on fire, water will do the best job of putting it out. This is a class A fire, and extinguishers containing water are labeled with an "A." Water is useful *only* on class A fires, and actually can be dangerous on other types of fires: water spreads grease fires and conducts electricity in an electrical fire.

Newer A-type extinguishers are available that spray a fine mist of water, which is safer (less likely to conduct electricity) and causes less damage to documents or books. Water mist extinguishers are appropriate for a home office or home library.

Class B fires: gasoline, kerosene, grease, oil, and other combustible liquids. This type of fire is common in the garage or kitchen, and you should use an extinguisher labeled B or BC. Most contain dry chemicals similar to bicarbonate of soda (a great all-purpose kitchen fire extinguisher) in a pressurized foam base. Others contain Halon (older models) or Halotron.

Class C fires: electrical equipment. Bicarbonate type (BC) extinguishers are also useful for electrical fires. But don't confuse electrical with *electronic* fires—you probably don't want chemical foam on your computer or entertainment components. Carbon dioxide (CO₂) extinguishers are also labeled BC, and these are probably better for extinguishing fires on or near electronic or other delicate equipment.

Halon is great for electronic fires, but if you're concerned about the ozone layer, you might prefer the more environmentally friendly Halotron. Keep the Halotron extinguisher near the computer or your entertainment electronics—it won't cause any damage if it's used on any of these—or in the kitchen to use on grease or electrical fires.

What Does the Number Mean?

Along with the alpha designations listed above, fire extinguishers also have a number. This indicates how much fire the extinguisher can handle—higher numbers put out bigger fires. However, bigger isn't always better. Large extinguishers are more difficult to handle and can only be used by one person at a time. If you feel you need added coverage, stock several smaller extinguishers rather than just one large one.

The All-Purpose Problem

Fire extinguishers labeled ABC will handle all classes of fire, and they would seem to eliminate the question, "What type do I need?" But the all-purpose extinguisher has some disadvantages. They're usually large and hard to handle, they contain chemicals that can corrode aluminum and damage electrical systems, and they leave a messy yellow residue.