

Fight or Flee?

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A fire is the most common type of emergency for which small businesses must plan. A critical decision when planning is whether or not employees should fight a small fire with a portable fire extinguisher or simply evacuate. Small fires can often be put out quickly by a well-trained employee with a portable fire extinguisher. However, to do this safely, the employee must understand the use and limitation of a portable fire extinguisher and the hazards associated with fighting fires. Evacuation plans that designate or require some or all of the employees to fight fires with portable fire extinguishers increase the level of complexity of the plan and the level of training that must be provided employees.



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Should employees evacuate or be prepared to fight a small fire?

Choosing to evacuate the workplace rather than providing fire extinguishers for employee use in fighting fires will most effectively minimize the potential for fire-related injuries to employees. In addition, training employees to use [fire extinguishers](#) and maintaining them requires considerable resources. However, other factors, such as the availability of a public fire department or the vulnerability of [egress routes](#), will enter into this decision.

Option 1	Option 2	Option 3	Option 4
Total evacuation of employees from the workplace immediately when alarm sounds. No one is authorized to use available portable fire extinguishers.	Designated employees are authorized to use portable fire extinguishers to fight fires. All other employees must evacuate workplace immediately when alarm sounds.	All employees are authorized to use portable fire extinguishers to fight fires.	Extinguishers are provided but not intended for employee use.

Requirement	Requirement	Requirement	Requirement
Establish an emergency action plan, fire prevention plan and train employees accordingly. Extinguishers are not existing and not required [29 CFR 1910.157(b)(1)].	Establish an emergency action plan and train employees accordingly. Meet all general fire extinguisher requirements plus annually train designated employees to use fire extinguishers. Fire extinguishers in the workplace must be inspected, tested, and maintained [29 CFR 1910.157(b)(2)].	If any employees will be evacuating, establish an emergency action plan and train employees accordingly. Meet all general fire extinguisher requirements plus annually train all employees to use fire extinguishers. Fire extinguishers in the workplace must be inspected, tested, and maintained [29 CFR 1910.157(b)(2)].	Establish an emergency action plan, fire prevention plan and train employees accordingly. If fire extinguishers are left in the workplace, they must be inspected, tested, and maintained. Extinguishers are provided but not intended for employee use [29 CFR 1910.157(a)].

Risk assessment

Portable fire extinguishers have two functions: to control or extinguish small or incipient stage fires and to protect evacuation routes that a fire may block directly or indirectly with smoke or burning/smoldering materials.

To extinguish a fire with a portable extinguisher, a person must have immediate access to the extinguisher, know how to actuate the unit, and know how to apply the agent effectively. Attempting to extinguish even a small fire carries some risk. Fires can increase in size and intensity in seconds, blocking the exit path of the fire fighter and creating a hazardous atmosphere. In addition, portable fire extinguishers contain a limited amount of extinguishing agent and can be discharged in a matter of seconds. Therefore, individuals should attempt to fight only very small or incipient stage fires.

Prior to fighting any fire with a portable fire extinguisher you must perform a risk assessment that evaluates the fire size, the fire fighters evacuation path, and the atmosphere in the vicinity of the fire.

Risk Assessment Question	Characteristics of incipient stage fires or fires that can be extinguished with portable fire extinguishers	Characteristics of fires that SHOULD NOT be fought with a portable fire extinguisher (beyond incipient stage) - evacuate immediately
Is the fire too big?	The fire is limited to the original material ignited, it is contained (such as in a waste basket) and has not spread to other materials. The flames are no higher than the firefighter's head.	The fire involves flammable solvents, has spread over more than 60 square feet, is partially hidden behind a wall or ceiling, or can not be reached from a standing position.
Is the air safe to breathe?	The fire has not depleted the oxygen in the room and is producing only small quantities of toxic gases. No respiratory protection equipment is required.	Due to smoke and products of combustion, the fire can not be fought without respiratory protection.
Is the environment too hot or smoky?	Heat is being generated, but the room temperature is only slightly increased. Smoke may be accumulating on the ceiling, but	The radiated heat is easily felt on exposed skin making it difficult to approach within 10-15 feet of the fire (or the effective range of the

	visibility is good. No special personal protective equipment is required.	extinguisher). One must crawl on the floor due to heat or smoke. Smoke is quickly filling the room, decreasing visibility.
Is there a safe evacuation path?	There is a clear evacuation path that is behind you as you fight the fire.	The fire is not contained, and fire, heat, or smoke may block the evacuation path.