

TheStar.com - Athome - Know how to fire up your extinguisher

It's important to properly operate safety device and to be aware of its limitations

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JENNIFER BROWN SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Apartment dwellers are more likely to experience a stovetop fire than those in other forms of housing, according to a recent study. Even scarier is the finding that few people would reach for a fire extinguisher if flames broke out on their stove.

According to a survey conducted last year by the Office of the Ontario Fire Marshal, the highest incidence of stovetop fires was in multi-unit buildings (43.3 per cent of all residential fires in Ontario in a 12-month period). Of those who tried to extinguish the fires, just 10 per cent said they used a fire extinguisher versus 18 per cent who used water.

In September, the OFM conducted the Ontario Stove Top Fire Survey and discovered that cooking is the Number 1 ignition source in 27 per cent of preventable residential fires, and 76 per cent of those cooking fires started on the stove. Most residential fires start in the kitchen

"I think a lot of people are intimidated by fire extinguishers," says Dave Horne, a fire protection engineer with the OFM, based in Toronto. It's one of the things that scares me the most. In an emergency, people expect they can remove the pin, squeeze the handle, aim and be the appropriate distance away and do the sweeping motion – it's not all that easy."

Horne says that while fire extinguishers work well when used on small fires, people must know the limitations of a portable extinguisher – and how and when to use them and what kind of fire the extinguisher is rated for. Above all, they must know the importance of having a complete fire safety plan and escape route in the event the fire cannot be contained.

If the fire is small, confined, and not spreading to other areas, you may be able to put the fire out with a home fire extinguisher, says Brian Stewart, district chief of public education with Toronto Fire Services. He emphasizes that before anyone buys a fire extinguisher, they should first make sure their smoke detectors are working properly and that they have an emergency plan to escape their apartment.

"Extinguishers are quite lightweight but the key is having the confidence and knowing what everyone else in the home should do when the fire is happening," says Stewart.

Even when using a fire extinguisher, experts say to first call 911 or have someone else in the apartment call emergency services while you are trying to put out the fire. Do not attempt to extinguish the fire if doing so would block the exit out of the unit. "If you have the confidence to fight the fire, or have some training, first be sure that everyone else is leaving the apartment or home and that someone is calling the fire department," says Stewart.

There are three basic classes of fire extinguishers and they are labelled to show the class of fire they were created to extinguish.

- Class A: Ordinary combustibles such as paper, wood, rubbish, drapes and upholstery.
- Class B: Flammable liquids such as gasoline, oils, solvents, paints and flammable gases.
- Class C: Electrical fires involving Class A or Class B materials and live electrical power (such as overheated wiring, fuse boxes, stoves, motors).

Numbers are also used with the letters in the labelling of extinguishers. The larger the number, the bigger the fire the extinguisher can put out. Extinguishers rated ABC Multipurpose provide the required protection for all of the above types of fire.

When buying an extinguisher, check to make sure it has been tested and listed by the Underwriters' Laboratories of Canada – look for the ULC label on the extinguisher.

To use a fire extinguisher properly, Stewart advises standing back from the fire 1.8 metres to 2.4 metres (six to eight feet) and following the steps in the PASS system:

- Pull the pin at the top of the extinguisher. The pin releases a locking mechanism and will allow you to discharge the extinguisher.
- Aim at the base of the fire, not the flames; to put out the fire, the source must be extinguished.
- Squeeze the lever slowly. This will release the extinguishing agent in the extinguisher. If the handle is released, the discharge will stop.
- Sweep from side to side. Using a sweeping motion, move the fire extinguisher back and forth until the fire is completely out. Operate the extinguisher from a safe distance.

Fire Extinguisher Fast Facts:

- Home-rated fire extinguishers range in price from \$18.99 to \$59.99 and are available at hardware, building and home improvement centres.
- Read all instructions that come with a fire extinguisher before installing or placing it in the home.
- A good place to install a fire extinguisher is on a wall, out of reach of children, near the kitchen but close to an exit door and away from the stove.
- Extinguishers come with a warranty of up to six years for most models, but be sure to check the gauge annually to be sure it is in working order.

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