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A fire extinguisher is a device used to extinguish or control small fires, often in emergency situations. A typical fire extinguisher consists of a handheld cylindrical pressure vessel containing an agent which can be discharged to extinguish a fire. Fire is the result of a chemical reaction between oxygen, heat and some form of fuel. When anyone of these elements is removed the fire goes out. This is the operating principal behind all fire extinguishers.

Different fuels create different kinds of fire and therefore require different types of fire extinguishers. Some extinguishers can safely be used on more than one kind of fire whereas others can be dangerous. For example, use of a water extinguisher on an electrical or oil based fire would be extremely hazardous. Therefore the correct selection and placement of extinguishers is a very important element of any fire safety management regime.

Fire regulations require businesses to ensure that there are a suitable number of fire extinguishers on site to ensure that if a fire does break out, the staff have some form of tool to combat the blaze if they feel safe to do so. The provision of suitable training to allow staff to correctly identify and operate the right extinguisher is a legal requirement.

The facilities management team are usually responsible for organising regular inspections and maintenance of all fire safety equipment and for keeping accurate records. Maintenance should be carried out in accordance with manufacturers instructions and would normally include a thorough examination of the mechanical parts, fire extinguishing agent and the expellent gas.

The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 says that any facilities, equipment and devices provided under the order must be subject to a suitable system of maintenance and should be maintained in an efficient state, in efficient working order and in good repair. The guidance to the Order says that fire extinguishers "will require periodic inspection, maintenance and testing. Depending on local conditions such as the likelihood of vandalism or the environment where the extinguishers are located, brief checks should be carried out to ensure that they remain serviceable. In normal conditions a monthly check should be enough. Maintenance by a competent person should be carried out annually."

A useful guide to fire safety law can be found at www.communities.gov.uk/fire/firesafety/firesafetylaw

A full list of British Standards relating to extinguishers and other useful information can be found at the website of the Fire Industry Association (FIA) www.fia.uk.com