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UNDERSTANDING FIRE EXTINGUISHERS

by Mac McCoy

Most people know it's wise to keep several fire extinguishers in an RV, car, boat and house. However, going through the process of choosing which fire extinguisher is the best for each situation can be difficult. There are a variety of fire extinguishers on the market, and a number of factors that affect each individual's buying decision.

As I travel across the country training RVers to be fire-safe with my Fire and Life Safety Seminar, there are a few questions I repeatedly hear:

- What do the numbers and letters on the fire extinguisher mean?
- Is my fire extinguisher safe to use around my children and animals?
- How much clean up is required when the contents of my fire extinguisher are expelled?
- How much does a good fire extinguisher cost?

Knowing the answers to these questions will help you determine which fire extinguisher is right for your GMC Motorhome.

What do the letters and numbers on the fire extinguisher mean?

Fire extinguishers may have one or more letters on the label—A, B, C, D or K—and a number from 1 to 120. The letters A, B, C, D and K represent the types of fires the extinguisher can extinguish.

Class A involves common combustibles like paper, fiberglass, wood, 12-volt DC wiring and many other items commonly found in a home, RV or boat.

Class B involves flammable and combustible liquids and gases like gasoline, diesel fuel, and propane.

Class C involves energized 120-volt AC electrical equipment, including wiring, fuse boxes, circuit breakers, machinery and appliances.

Class D involves combustible metals like magnesium, sodium, potassium, sodium-potassium alloy, uranium and powdered aluminum.

Class K involves restaurant grease.

If any of these symbols are missing on a portable

fire extinguisher, it has not been rated for that class of fire.

The numbers on the label represent the area the fire extinguisher will cover. Class A is measured in cubic feet (1A equals 8 cubic feet). Class B fires are measured in square feet (10B equals 10 square feet). There is no area measurement for Class C.

Types of Fire Extinguishers

There are a variety of fire extinguishers on the market. Some are designed for personal use, and some for professional use. The following is a list of all fire extinguishers available today.

ABC Dry Chemical: The material used in this type of extinguisher is monoammonium phosphate, a hazardous material that can be toxic. It has a very limited Class A fire-fighting ability. With this type, a very large ABC dry chemical extinguisher is required to handle a small Class A fire. Once the contents are expelled, the ABC dry chemical is very expensive to clean up. The cost of this type of extinguisher is \$10 to \$150, depending on its size.

Purple K (PKP) BC Dry Chemical: The material used in this type of extinguisher is potassium bicarbonate, which is a hazardous material. The military and airports are the main users of the PKP. It is available on a limited basis and is expensive, \$20 to \$50 each, depending on size.

BC Dry Powder: This is the most common and least expensive extinguisher. It's made of non-toxic, sodium bicarbonate. The National Fire Protection Association requires only one 5BC extinguisher in a non-motorized RV trailer, regardless of size or type of construction. For a motorized Class A, B or C motorhome, no matter the size, a 10BC extinguisher is required. The dry powder is messy to clean up, but the extinguisher is popular because of its low price. A BC Dry Powder extinguisher can be purchased for as low as \$6. The price can go up to approximately \$60 for a larger size.

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