The Right Fire Extinguisher for the Job

Firefighters and safety professionals classify fires by the type of fuel that is burning. Fires that involve wood, paper, and other solid fuels are called Class A fires. Fires fueled by flammable liquids, such as grease, gasoline, or oil are called Class B fires. Class C fires are those that involve active electricity. Fires fueled by the combustion of flammable metals, such as sodium, are Class D fires.

A specific type of fire extinguisher is best for each type of fire. Water is fine for Class A fires, but Class B fires are best fought by applying cold carbon dioxide gas, CO₂. Class C fires can also be extinguished by CO₂, and water should never be applied to an electrical fire. The best firefighting solution for a Class D fire depends on the specific metal that is burning.

How to Identify the Right Extinguisher

Choosing the right fire extinguisher is important. Using the wrong fire extinguisher could accelerate or spread the fire instead of putting it out. The standard letter and picture symbols shown above are used on fire extinguishers to help people find the right extinguisher for each class of fire. Class D fire extinguishers have no picture symbol, but a Class D fire extinguisher is marked with the letter D in a yellow star.

Many extinguishers available today can be used on more than one type of fire, and are labeled with the letter and picture symbols for each kind of fire they can put out. If using an extinguisher for a particular type of fire is dangerous, the symbol for that class of fire will appear on the extinguisher with a diagonal line through it.

Your Turn to Think

1. Look at the label on the right. List the classes of fire for which an extinguisher with this label would and would not be suitable.

2. Look at the label on the right. If your computer caught fire, should you use an extinguisher with such a label? Why or why not?