

# Protecting your practice from fire



**Dominic Slingsby**<sup>1</sup> explains what dental practices need to consider when it comes to fire regulations and safety.

**F**ire regulations are a vital safety component in all workplaces but despite them being governed by stringent legislation, there are still lots of UK employers getting them wrong.

We provide a wide range of fire extinguishers, signage, alarms, fire buckets and blankets and regularly advise dental practices, as well as related businesses, about the products they require to maintain a safe working environment and stay on the right side of the law. This is covered by The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 in England and Wales, or The Fire Safety (Scotland) Regulations 2006. A key part of this legislation means employers must carry out regular fire safety risk assessments and take appropriate action to minimise risks. This should also take workers' capabilities into consideration along with specific risks they may face in their job roles.

## Minimising fire risks

In workplaces with five or more employees, there needs to be a written risk assessment and it should pay specific attention to parts of the premises that could be particularly at risk of a fire. The risk assessment should address how fire risks are being minimised and highlight fire precautions that are in place to deal with relevant hazards. In addition, a plan should be created to deal with emergency situations and all employees should be made aware of

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evacuation procedures. Generally it makes sense to nominate a responsible team member to oversee fire safety duties. Relevant training for them can also be very beneficial which might include general fire awareness and training in specific areas of fire safety such as carrying out risk assessments, fire warden duties and using fire extinguishers.

## Workplace fires and escape routes

In 2013-14, there were 22,200 fires recorded in the UK in non-residential buildings and we've recently seen a number of high-profile fires hitting workplaces which have made a lot of organisations consider whether their own procedures and equipment are up to scratch. Ultimately, there are still work premises out there that fail to meet the required standard and a common issue is organisations that have reconfigured or expanded their buildings without making changes to their fire procedures.

Generally, all buildings must have adequate escape routes for their size and layout and clear signage should explain fire procedures and highlight exits. In premises where employees could be unaware of a fire, either because it's out of sight or they can't hear warnings from colleagues, suitable fire alarms should be installed. This can be particularly relevant in dental surgeries which are usually divided up into private treatment rooms and surgical areas, which creates lots of blind spots. Emergency lighting may also be necessary in very dark escape routes.

## Fire extinguishers

Usually one water based extinguisher is required for each 200 m<sup>2</sup> of floor space, with a minimum of two extinguishers per floor.

However, in large or more complex premises, and depending on individual risks, a greater number or wider range of extinguishers could be required. Some premises may also require hose reels and fire blankets to be installed.

It's also important to check that fire extinguishers on premises are relevant to the potential risks. Red, water filled extinguishers are the most common and are ideal for fires involving solid materials such as wood, paper and textiles etc. These should not be used with liquid fires such as oils and fats, electrical fires and fires involving flammable gases.

Blue extinguishers douse flames with dry powder and are good in areas where there could be multiple hazards that might include solid materials, liquid fires, flammable gas fires and some electrical fires. However, because the powder doesn't cool the fire in the same way that water does, fires can occasionally reignite if they haven't been put out properly.

Foam filled, cream coloured extinguishers are ideal for putting out solid materials and fires involving liquids. However, foam conducts electricity so it shouldn't be used on electrical fires or fires involving flammable gases.

Lastly, there are black, carbon dioxide filled extinguishers. These are good for fires involving liquids because it has a rapid smothering effect and leaves no residue. They can also be used on electrical fires and some small fires involving solid materials but they should never be used on fires where flammable gases are present.

Finally it's worth remembering that approximately 80% of workplace fires are put out using portable fire extinguishers so it's worth offering specialist training to staff in the use of these.

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