

Spot The Safety Violation: 10 Portable Heater Safety Dos & Don'ts



Based on these pictures, how do you think the fire at this construction site started'



It's common for workers in construction and other industries to use portable heaters in the winter to stay warm and avoid the risk of cold stress. But portable heaters pose their own safety hazards if they're not used properly.

For example, these pictures are of a fire at a high rise construction site in BC. A construction heater was attached to a 100 lb. propane cylinder and set up near the construction elevator access for the floor.

A worker dropped off a wheeled plastic garbage tote to the floor. The tote was left close to the operating heater, causing the tote to melt and eventually catch fire. As the fire grew, it burned the propane supply hose serving the heater, rupturing the hose in several areas and causing propane to spill directly into the fire. The addition of the propane greatly increased the fire's intensity.

A worker who saw the fire was able to shut off the propane cylinder and call 911. Fortunately, no one was hurt and the damage was limited to a small area. But it's an example of the potential hazards associated with portable heater use when proper precautions aren't taken.

10 PORTABLE HEATER DOS & DON'TS

You should ensure that you comply with the portable heater requirements in the OHS regulations in your jurisdiction. In addition, here are some dos and don'ts for safely using such heaters in your workplace:

DO ensure that individuals working around portable heaters are aware of the safety requirements, potential risks and related safe work procedures.

DON'T block exits, stairways or any means of exit from a building with a portable heater.

DO make sure you keep space heaters at least three feet away from any flammable or explosive materials'and don't place any such materials near the heaters.

DON'T use a portable space heater without first getting a supervisor's permission.

DO make sure that all heaters used in the workplace have a label indicating that they've been tested by a lab such as the Underwriter's Laboratories (UL).

DON'T use an extension cord or power strip with an electric space heater because it might start a fire.

DO ensure that electric heaters are grounded with a three-pronged plug.

DON'T place gas, propane or kerosene powered heaters in enclosed spaces or areas that don't have proper ventilation'carbon monoxide could build up to dangerous levels.

DO ensure that heaters are placed so that they can't be knocked or tipped over.

DON'T run a power cord for a space heater across the floor so that it becomes a trip hazard.

The OHS Insider has more fire safety resources, including:

- Information on what the OHS laws require for fire preparedness and response
- A fire safety assessment form
- A fire safety checklist for industrial workplaces
- A fire safety checklist for offices.