



The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced us to several new concepts such as social distancing, face mask wearing and the regular use of alcohol-based hand and surface sanitizers.

All these measures have been introduced to protect us from the viruses that cause COVID-19 and are now probably second nature to us, but some bring other safety issues that need to be considered, particularly the use of alcohol-based hand and surface sanitizers.

As well as other ingredients, alcohol-based hand and surface sanitizers typically contain at least 60% alcohol (and some go as high as 80% alcohol). This means that sanitizers are part of a group of chemicals that are classed as 'flammable' with a flash point below 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

'Flash point' is a term used to describe the temperature at which a compound gives off enough vapour to ignite in air.

The various national and provincial fire codes define the volume limit of flammable liquids that can be stored in any room or fire compartment, and these will be known to those organizations that use these compounds regularly.

However, the various public health directives, designed to keep people safe during the pandemic, mean that many businesses, faith groups, not-for-profit organizations etc. are now storing these flammable liquids where they would not have done so pre-pandemic. Containers for alcohol-based sanitizers come in various sizes from tens of millilitres (mL) to litres (L) and can now be found in classrooms, meeting rooms, entrance ways, gyms and many more locations.

While an important weapon in fighting viruses it should be remembered that these flammable liquids increase fire risk and can dramatically change the dynamics of any fire in a building where these are stored.

Review your Fire Risk Assessment

Ecclesiastical Insurance recommends that you review and update your fire risk assessment to reflect any changes introduced in response to the current pandemic which could increase the fire risk, including the introduction of alcohol-based hand and surface sanitizers.

As part of your review, you should consider:



- Limiting the quantity of alcohol-based hand sanitizer being stored, taking into account your weekly usage. Where amounts in excess of 5 litres are being stored these should be located in a metal, flame proof cabinet.
- Locating hand sanitizer dispensers in well ventilated areas. Avoid positioning them close to any potential ignition source including electrical outlets, heating devices, electric baseboards, electronics etc. Similarly, unopened hand sanitizer containers should not be stored in mechanical rooms where electrical panels, appliances and heating systems are present nor should they be stored below grade in basement areas.
- Incorporating a drip tray beneath the dispenser to minimize the risk of spillage and have arrangements in place for the safe disposal of any waste, especially those containers that are not completely empty.
- Not placing dispensing units over carpet, to reduce the sanitizer soiling or accumulating on it.
- Clean-up: any spillages should be cleaned up straight away and safely disposed of.

Refilling Dispensers

Avoid refilling 'point of use' dispensers from larger, storage containers. This activity that involves pouring and decanting from a larger container to the dispenser, can cause large volumes of vapour to be released and is strongly discouraged. This activity should be stopped as soon as practical, as

operations like these require mandatory control measures to remove flammable vapours, such as the use of specialist flammable liquid dispensing cans; special venting and flameproof exhaust ducting in the area; and the lighting and electrical fixtures in the immediate area must be explosion proof.

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