



Risk Management Considerations for Space Heaters in an Office Environment

Do you allow the use of portable space heaters in your workplace? You may be interested to know that the older space conditioning heating and cooling formulas from the 1960's were based on a 40 year old man weighing 154 lbs at a time when they wore suits to work. Times have changed and so has the office decorum.

There are no legislated workplace safety rules that prohibit portable electric space heaters in the workplace. However, there's no question that space heaters can pose a major workplace fire safety hazard. Fires can be caused by space heaters without adequate safety features or space heaters that are improperly plugged in.

Space heaters can be used safely in the workplace if proper precautions are taken. Ask yourself these questions before using space heaters in an office environment:

- Do you have a policy to allow space heaters and who approves the use? If allowed, then safety communication with employees is essential.
- How many are allowed in your facility?

Once you have conducted an electrical survey, the results will indicate how many space heaters are allowed, identify which circuits are able to accept the extra load, and identify which outlets can be utilized. The acceptable outlets should then be marked and identified.

When deciding where to place your space heater, follow these general safety guidelines:

- Never plug it into a power strip or use an extension cord.
- Situate the space heater away from any wall thermostats.
- Do not to use chemical (kerosene) or gas heaters (propane) indoors.
- Do not use heater in wet areas such as bathrooms or kitchens.
- Do not place heater under a desk, in the way of exit paths, or in high traffic areas.
- Keep heater 3 ft away from curtains or combustibles.

Once your space heater is safely set up and ready to use, the employee is responsible for monitoring the heater and shutting it off when leaving for a meeting or for the day. A hardware option that can also be considered is a motion sensor that can shut off when the employee is not there. The unit should have an overheating automatic shutoff as well as a fan.

Choosing a space heater that is appropriate and safe for your area is important. For example, the unit should be the right size for the area, have a tip over safety switch, and be CSA or UL certified. You may also want to consider a unit with a programmable thermostat in order to reduce cycling.

If the situation of needing a space heater becomes constant, consider installing a permanent heating appliance.