

Fireproof Cabinets

These are the 10 most commonly asked questions about fireproof cabinets for commercial office environments, with straightforward answers to help you make a confident, well-informed purchase decision.

Top 10 Questions — Fireproof Cabinets

1

What is the difference between a UL 350 rating and a UL Class 125 rating?

UL 350 (available in 1-hour, 2-hour, and 4-hour durations) limits the interior temperature to 350°F — this protects paper documents, which combust at approximately 451°F. However, 350°F will destroy magnetic media (tapes, hard drives), solid-state media (USB drives, SSDs), and optical discs, which are damaged at 125–150°F. UL Class 125 limits the interior temperature to 125°F for 60–120 minutes, protecting digital media. If your cabinet will hold only paper documents, UL 350 is correct. If you are storing digital media alongside or instead of paper, you must specify UL Class 125 or UL Class 150. Many organizations incorrectly assume a fire-rated cabinet protects all their stored materials regardless of media type.

2

How heavy is a fireproof filing cabinet compared to a standard one?

Fireproof cabinets are dramatically heavier than standard filing cabinets due to the fire-resistant insulation material (typically concrete-based compound, vermiculite, or ceramic) molded into the walls, top, bottom, and door. A standard 2-drawer lateral file weighs approximately 150 lbs; the fireproof equivalent weighs 300–380 lbs — 2 to 2.5 times heavier. A 4-drawer lateral fireproof file weighs 450–600 lbs. This weight has direct implications for delivery (requires a furniture dolly, pallet jack, or specialty movers), floor loading (commercial buildings typically support 50–100 lbs per square foot), and repositioning (a 500-lb cabinet is a major operation to move after placement). Specify the exact final room location before delivery — repositioning post-delivery is extremely difficult.

3**What UL rating do I need to protect paper documents?**

To protect paper documents, specify a product with a UL 350 rating — this keeps the interior temperature below 350°F (paper combust at 451°F) for the rated duration. UL 350 1-hour is the minimum for most commercial applications and the most common specification. UL 350 2-hour provides extended protection for buildings that may take longer to suppress a fire or that contain higher quantities of critical documents. UL 350 4-hour is appropriate for the most critical records or buildings with limited fire suppression access. For multi-story buildings where a floor collapse during a fire is a risk, specify a product with UL 72 Class 350 rating, which adds a 30-foot drop test to the fire test — a significantly more demanding certification.

4**Does a fireproof cabinet also protect against water damage?**

Not automatically — fire resistance and water resistance are separate UL certifications. Water resistance is a separate UL test and listing, and not all fire-rated cabinets have it. Water damage from sprinkler systems and fire hose suppression often causes as much damage as the fire itself — particularly to paper documents that can absorb sprinkler water through unsealed cabinet openings. For irreplaceable original documents, specify cabinets that have both a UL fire rating and a UL water-ingress rating. Water-resistant cabinets use silicone gaskets, compression door seals, and sealed drawer perimeters to prevent ingress. Even with a water-resistance rating, open fire-rated cabinets carefully after a fire event as interior condensation can still damage paper.

5**Who is legally required to use fireproof storage?**

Fireproof storage is commonly mandated across multiple regulated industries. Legal practices must protect original signed documents, deeds, wills, trusts, and court orders under bar association retention rules. Healthcare organizations must protect original medical records and patient files under HIPAA's integrity and availability requirements. Financial services firms must protect financial records and audit documents under SOX, FINRA, and SEC retention requirements. Government agencies are subject to federal and state records retention laws and GSA specifications. Real estate and title companies must protect chain-of-title documents under legal chain-of-title requirements. Always verify your specific jurisdiction's retention and storage requirements with legal counsel — the penalties for records loss in regulated industries can be severe.

6**What lock type should I choose for a fireproof cabinet?**

For general office use, an electronic keypad lock is the most practical — user-programmed PIN codes are easy to change when personnel change, high-end models provide audit logging, and battery dependency is the primary limitation. For high-security or government applications where electronic vulnerability is a concern, a combination dial lock provides maximum security with no batteries required, though it takes 30–45 seconds to open. Key locks are the simplest option but keys can be duplicated, creating a security risk. Biometric (fingerprint) locks offer keyless convenience for single-user high-frequency access. For maximum security, dual-lock configurations (two mechanisms) are available on high-end safes — the unit remains locked if one mechanism is defeated.

7**What is the difference between a fireproof filing cabinet and a fireproof safe?**

Fireproof filing cabinets are designed for organized paper document storage — they provide hanging file folder drawers in standard sizes (lateral 30–42 inches or vertical 15–18 inches) within a fire-rated enclosure. Fireproof safes provide fire protection plus physical security (burglary resistance) — they use significantly thicker steel walls and door construction, do not have file drawer interiors, and carry both fire ratings and burglary ratings (B-rated, C-rated, TL-15, TL-30). Many organizations need both: fireproof filing cabinets for routine paper records, and a fireproof safe for negotiable instruments, petty cash, backup media, and irreplaceable originals that also require burglary protection. Safes are rated by both fire duration and resistance to skilled tool attack.

8**What size fireproof filing cabinet do I need?**

Lateral fireproof filing cabinets come in 30–42 inch widths and either 2-drawer (counter height) or 4-drawer (full height) configurations. Each drawer holds approximately 350–450 letter-size hanging folders or ~300 legal-size folders. A 4-drawer lateral unit at 36 inches wide handles approximately 1,200–1,400 letter-size folders — enough for a department's active records. Depth is 18–22 inches (deeper than standard due to the insulation walls). A 2-drawer lateral unit at counter height serves as both a filing cabinet and a surface for printers or supplies. Vertical fireproof files are narrower (15–18 inches) and appropriate for personal workstation filing in tight spaces, with a 4-drawer vertical unit weighing 150–250 lbs.

9**How do I verify that a fireproof product is genuinely certified?**

Always verify the UL listing number on any fireproof product before purchasing. Products making 'fireproof' claims without a verifiable UL listing number have not been independently tested and cannot be trusted to perform to any specific standard in a real fire. The UL listing number can be confirmed at the UL Product iQ database. Reputable commercial fireproof storage products will prominently display their UL listing number in product specifications. Avoid products that only claim 'fire resistant' or 'fire proof' without citing a specific UL standard and listing. This verification step is especially critical in regulated industries where fireproof storage is required for compliance — an uncertified product provides no defensible protection.

10**Can a fireproof cabinet be installed on an upper floor?**

Yes, but floor load capacity must be verified first. Loaded fireproof cabinets concentrate significant weight in a small footprint — a loaded 4-drawer lateral fireproof file can weigh 500–600 lbs. Commercial buildings are typically rated for 50–100 lbs per square foot of live load. Multiple fireproof cabinets in a concentrated area can exceed local floor load limits, particularly on upper floors or in older buildings. Position heavy units along structural walls and load-bearing lines whenever possible. For large installations, consult a structural engineer before specifying placement. Also confirm the delivery path — a 500-lb cabinet requires a freight elevator or loading dock and specialty movers, not a standard stairwell or passenger elevator.

Have more questions? Our office furniture specialists are ready to help.

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