

Lessons from the warning signs at gas stations

By Susan Dubin

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While filling up my car at the gas station a few weeks ago, I hung out inside my car as my fuel tank filled up.

For some random reason later that evening, I was discussing this with my husband, Bill, who told me how I should never get back in my car when fueling because a spark could fly out, possibly ignite and start a fire.

That did sound somewhat familiar. Although I thought Bill was being dramatic, I totally obliged the next time I got gasoline.

So, while filling up my car last week, I glanced at the large "WARNING" sign on the pump. Since I had loads of extra time now that I was standing outside during fueling, I decided actually to read it.

First, I noticed Bill was right.

Under the title "Static Electric Spark Explosion Hazard," it clearly states in ever-so-teensy print how drivers should not get back in the car while refueling because it can cause a static electricity spark.

Something else I noticed under the "Spark Explosion Hazard" title was how cell phones should not only be turned off but also left in the car.

I was surprised by that and wondered if that information was outdated since I see so many people on cell phones at gas stations.

I also really enjoyed reading the "Health Warnings" category.

One helpful tip said how people should keep the nozzle away from one's eyes while refueling. And I totally smiled to myself when I read, "never siphon by mouth."

Really? Are there actually people on this planet who would do these things? And if someone actually decided to fill his or her eyes or mouth with gasoline, do we think this person would be reading the "WARNING" sign?

Last, I read the "In Case of Fire" section.

When I got to the part about activating the emergency shut-off switch, I immediately thought to myself, "There's a shut-off switch?"

I assumed the switch was going to be right in front at the pump. But I looked and looked and never found it.

Suddenly, I pictured myself running around haphazardly, trying to find the emergency shut-off switch if the need ever arose.

I ultimately decided to seek an expert opinion about my (burning) gas station questions, so I called up Bob Grum, a retired deputy fire chief in Lake Forest. First, we discussed the rules about using cell phones at gas stations.

"It is not recommended to use cell phones or other electronics when refueling," Grum said. "In some devices, there could be a static electricity charge created. It's possible it could ignite the gasoline fumes."

Regarding the rule about leaving a cell phone in the car, Grum said that really depends on the manufacturer's recommendation.

"If it's off, it's probably not a likely hazard. But if it's on, and someone calls you, it could create a spark," he said. "Cell phones also can be a distraction. When you're refueling, you're taking a hazardous substance and putting it in your car, so you want to be paying attention to what you are doing and avoid distractions. It's less likely you would attempt to answer your phone (while) refueling, if it's off and in your vehicle."

I also wondered if Grum ever came into contact with people who tried to siphon gas by using their mouths.

"It doesn't happen often nowadays," Grum said. "When gas was very expensive, it was not unusual for people to siphon gas out of other people's cars. Gas also is highly toxic and would cause health problems if you swallow or inhale it."

And what about that emergency shut-off switch?

"It's usually located away from the pumps somewhere on the building itself," Grum said. "It should be very well-marked."

I'm seriously going to look for this next time I get gasoline. I also asked him if he had any other tips for people when they refill at the pump.

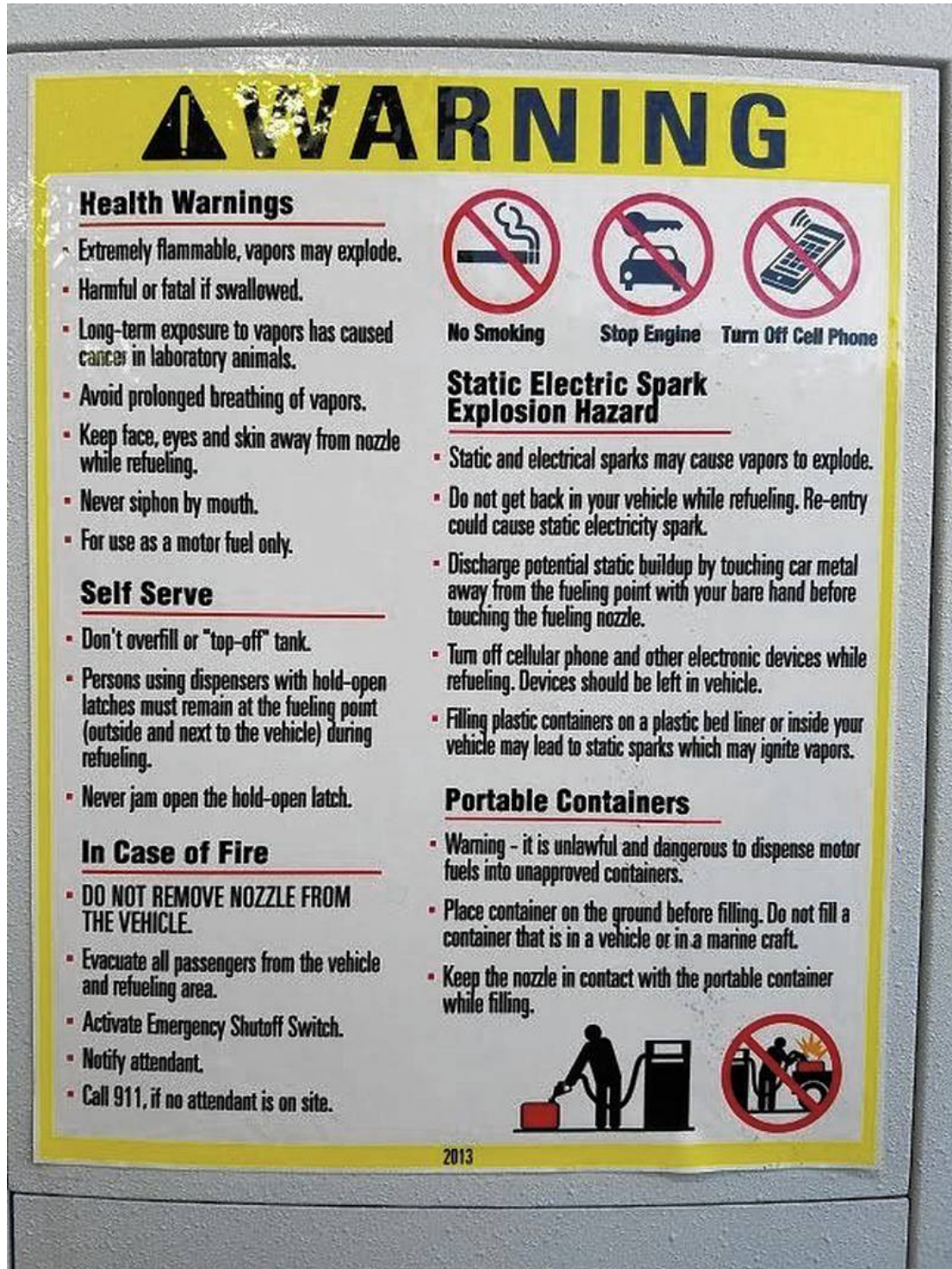
"When filling a portable gas tank, like for lawn mowers, put the container on the ground outside the vehicle," Grum said. "Keep the tip of the nozzle in contact with the tank the entire time and don't try to center it in the container. If the nozzle is not touching the container, it can create a static electrical charge."

In the end, Grum advised people to avoid getting into the car during the fueling process.

"It's not likely, but there's always potential for a problem, especially if you're not paying attention," he said. "If you do get into your car and then back out to remove the nozzle, touch the metal on the side of the car a few feet away from the nozzle. This will release any possible static electrical charge."

The entire "WARNING" sign may be scary (and a little funny), but everyone should take a peek at it once in a while for a little refresher course in gas station safety.

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A gas station warning sign is pictured. (Susan Dubin / Handout)