



Prevent Chimney Fires

Chimney fires cause hundreds of deaths and millions of dollars in lost property every year in the United States. But they can be easily prevented, say University of Georgia experts.

The key is to keep the fireplace free of creosote build-up. Creosote is a flammable, sticky substance caused by unburned gases that condense on the inside of the chimney.

Clean your chimney

Proper chimney cleaning is the key to preventing creosote build-up. First, check the chimney closely for creosote. Or have a professional chimney sweep do it for you.

A quarter-inch of creosote build-up signals the time for a cleanup. Check as often as twice a month during the heating season.

The chimneys of open fireplaces need cleaning only every two or three years. But those serving wood-burning stoves and manufactured metal fireplaces require annual cleaning. That's because their fires burn more slowly and produce more creosote.

Protect your chimney

You can protect your chimney from creosote build-up while your fire is burning by using only well-seasoned wood. Also avoid using low damper settings for extended times.

The temperature of the fire also plays a big role in creosote formation or burning. Always run a wood stove within the manufacturer's recommended temperature limits. Too low a temperature increases creosote build-up, and too high a temperature may eventually cause damage to the chimney and result in a chimney fire.

Avoid roaring fires by adding only enough fuel to keep the fire at the desired temperature. And never burn household trash, cardboard or Christmas trees in your fireplace. The sparks they produce can lead to chimney fires.

Chimney fires can be identified by sucking sounds, a loud roar and shaking pipes. Fires can be controlled with minimal damage if you follow these suggestions from UGA experts.

Always call the fire department first. Then cut off the fire's air supply by closing any air intake vents to the firebox, close the stove damper, and always keep a class ABC dry chemical fire extinguisher handy.

Check chimney structure and fireplace equipment

In addition to checking for creosote build-up, check the structural soundness of the chimney, too. Check for any damages that may have happened in the past heating season. Look often for signs of structural failure and have any damages repaired immediately."

Other signs of structural damage include corrosion or rusting of the inner liners of metal chimneys and buckling, separation of the seam or collapsing of the inner lining of metal chimneys.

Improper installation of the fireplace or stove is another culprit of starting fires. Placing the chimney too close to wood framing or thermal insulation or improperly passing the chimney through a ceiling or wall can cause the wood framing to ignite.

In addition to the chimney, also inspect any electrical components, the blowers, or anything that might be associated with your wood-burning unit. Also check the integrity of the chimney stove pipe and any flame arresters.

If you have an open fireplace, without a screen, check for nests that may have been built inside over the summer. It is best to try to clean out any nests that may be in the chimney flu because these could cause a little excitement or a flash fire when you first light your fireplace.

If your fireplace operates by pilot lights or gas starter, check fittings to make sure they are in proper working order. If any questions arise in your survey of your equipment contact someone who can come out and check the connections.

Sources: Dale Dorman, Julian Beckwith and David Moorhead, University of Georgia