

Home Owner Information Guide 23.0



Fireplaces

The ultimate aesthetic or functional benefit of a fireplace is determined by its design, material makeup, and the maintenance provided. For safe operation, all external and internal components of the fireplace should be checked periodically. The required frequency of cleaning (creosote removal) will be determined by its usage; if used regularly, it should be checked often and cleaned at least once a year. Creosote residue accumulates on relatively cool chimney linings and, when ignited, causes an extremely hot, damaging fire.



In addition to cleaning needs, there are several fireplace conditions that may need to be addressed by a specialist. Smoke staining or other signs of inadequate venting may be indicative of numerous conditions or concerns, including, blockage of the flue; an undersized smoke shelf (or flue offset); generally poor design; and material or construction

defects. Venting problems can be constant or may only occur periodically when certain conditions exist. Smoke staining may simply be an indication of misuse of the fireplace (lighting a fire with a closed damper) or could indicate a more serious problem.

Rust or water staining within a fireplace or flue is often due to either the lack of a rain cap or flue alignment problems. Metal or metal-lined fireplaces are particularly susceptible to damage from water leakage. If leakage concerns exist, the chimney interior should be checked for damage. Some water seepage problems may be easily controlled with a flueguard or rain cap.

Fireplace flues are usually lined with a smooth, heat-resistant material to prevent damage to the chimney interior or leakage of combustion products. If use of an old unlined chimney is anticipated, or if signs of deterioration exist, a company specializing in chimney relining work should be contacted. It is generally recommended, if not required by local code, that each solid-fuel burning (coal or wood) fireplace or stove have its own separate flue. Cross connections with other units or appliances may affect the operation and present a potential hazard.

Sealed or blocked fireplaces/flues should be assessed from the chimney top down prior to contemplating usage. The potential for hidden/interior damage exists. Birds and animals often nest in seldom-used chimney flues.

A damper is typically installed over the firebox to close off the flue (and prevent heat loss) when the unit is not in use. Dampers can become damaged over time or, in some cases, may be lacking. Providing a functional damper

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Fireplaces (continued)

and/or tempered glass doors at the firebox opening is generally beneficial.

For safe operation and maintenance of wood-burning fireplaces consider the following tips:

- Have all fireplaces checked at least once each year to determine that all vents and chimneys are operating properly.
- Before using your fireplace for the first time each season, check the chimney for blockage or creosote build-up. Gummy or glazed deposits, particularly if greater than 1/4-inch thick, can be dangerous and indicate the need to have the chimney cleaned.
- Maintain a moderate fire — hot enough to keep the flue warm, but not so hot that deposits on the walls ignite. Use seasoned wood; never burn trash, charcoal or plastic materials in a fireplace. Follow the manufacturer instructions when using artificial logs (made of sawdust and wax) the same way you treat real wood logs. Use only one at a time—if misused they can produce too much heat.
- Don't use flammable liquids such as kerosene or gasoline to start or re-kindle a fire. They can cause a flashfire or explosion.

- Always keep the damper open when using your fireplace to provide for efficient burning and proper venting.
- Install a spark screen and flueguard over the chimney flue. This will help prevent sparks from escaping and causing roof or exterior building fires. It may also keep birds and animals out.
- Keep an interior fireplace screen in place during use to avoid stray sparks from entering room.

Note on fireplace inserts and stoves. Each type of fireplace insert or freestanding stove has specific installation requirements and is also subject to local codes and ordinances. Due to the variability of these requirements, any comments made as part of a standard home inspection do not represent a full inspection or evaluation. Obtain additional information from the manufacturer and local authorities on any installed units, including documentation of initial approvals and regular inspection reports, if locally required. Special attention should be paid to clearances-from-combustibles requirements. **All fireplaces and chimneys need to be checked and cleaned on a regular basis. A certified chimney sweep is often the most qualified specialist when it comes to this type service.**

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