

Check Your Chimney

Chimney fires (sometimes called flue fires) can be your worst enemy. As the popularity of heating with wood continues to grow, so does the rate of house fires caused by wood stoves. In fact, wood stoves and fireplace inserts are now the leading cause of house fires nationwide. These fires fall into two categories - those resulting from improper installation and those resulting from chimney abuse.

Proper Installation Important

The fires resulting from improper installation could be avoided if homeowners would just get the required building permit and have the installation inspected. Remember, every solid fuel appliance installation requires a permit, whether inside the city limits or outside. It is the responsibility of the homeowner to make sure there is a permit issued. If the installer fails to obtain one, the homeowner should see to it.

After the appliance is correctly installed and properly inspected, chimney abuse becomes the danger. Chimney abuse is strictly a user problem. Even the safest installation will cause a fire if the chimney is not properly maintained.

Types of Chimneys

Chimneys fall into two categories; site-built (masonry) and factory-built (metal). Properly made, installed, and maintained, either type will provide many years of safe service. If not carefully maintained, either kind becomes a time bomb, ticking away, waiting for the moment when it will create a disaster.

Chimney Maintenance Vital

Proper maintenance of a chimney reduces the buildup of creosote, a black tarry substance which can block passageways or ignite. Begin with carefully selecting the kind of wood you will burn. The harder the wood, the smaller the creosote release into the chimney, then curing that wood becomes important. Wood that is allowed to cure for three to six months after cutting and splitting will yield more heat and less creosote.

Maintaining proper flue temperatures is also a part of good chimney maintenance. Creosote condenses onto cold chimney while properly heated chimneys will trap much less. So burn open fire until good flue temperatures are achieved, then make sure the fire burns hot enough to maintain those temperatures.

Clean Chimney at Least Once a Year

Any chimney should be thoroughly cleaned at least once a year. Chimneys that get a lot of use will require more frequent cleaning. Remember, soot and creosote buildup in the chimney is what flue fires are made of. Keep it clean, and you have protected yourself from this danger.

Carefully Inspect the Flue

As part of this chimney-cleaning process and following any chimney fire, the flue should be carefully inspected inside and out. Specialized equipment is not available wherever its detailed internal inspection of the entire flue. The yellow pages list a number of companies (under "Chimney Cleaning") that are equipped to proceed this inspection.

Never use a damaged flue - your safety is at risk. Have the problem corrected before using it again! Remember, our life may depend on it!

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