

Sweeping out your Chimney



By Rick Bunzel

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As you snuggle in front of a cozy fire or bask in the warmth of your wood stove, you are taking part in a ritual of comfort and enjoyment handed down through the centuries. The last thing you are likely to be thinking about is the condition of your chimney. However, if you don't give some thought to it before you light those winter fires, your enjoyment may be very short-lived. Why? Dirty chimneys can cause chimney fires, which damage and destroy homes or injure people. As if that's not enough, damaged or deteriorating flue liners, soot build-up, and animal or bird nests all obstruct chimney flues, which can lead to carbon monoxide poisoning.

When you burn wood for heat, the fire is not hot enough to consume all of the combustibles in the wood. The fire produces by-products that condense on the inner walls of the chimney. These condensed by-products form creosote, which is highly flammable, and is what fuels a chimney fire. When most people think of a chimney fire, they picture a violent explosion of flame and dense smoke that attracts the attention of neighbors as well as the home occupants. Flames or dense smoke may shoot from the top of the chimney. Some fires take on the appearance of an oversize roman candle.

However, it is possible to have a chimney fire and not even know it. Slow-burning chimney fires don't get enough fuel to be as dramatic or visible. Yet, the temperatures they reach are very high, around 2000 F, and can cause as much damage to the chimney and nearby combustible parts of the house as a more explosive chimney fire. One chimney fire may not harm a home. A second fire can burn it down as even a perfectly sound chimney of flue can conduct enough heat to ignite nearby combustibles.

With proper chimney system care, chimney fires are entirely preventable. A chimney cleaning and inspection should be part of your yearly or bi-yearly home maintenance plan. A chimney sweep can be found in the yellow pages under "chimney cleaning." Prices vary but expect to pay \$150-\$200.00 in Boulder County.

When you hire a professional, Chimney Safety Institute of America (CSIA) certified chimney sweep, that person will clean the chimney, look for previous chimney fire as well as inspect the whole system for operability.

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In case of a chimney fire, follow these steps:

- Call 911 immediately.
- Evacuate everyone from the home
- Close the appliance's dampers and/or the primary air inlet controls, limiting the fire's air supply and reducing its intensity. If there is a barometric damper in the chimney connector, plug or close the opening in the barometric damper.
- Open the appliance door just enough to insert the nozzle of a 10 lb. dry chemical fire extinguisher rated for Class ABC fires. Discharge the entire content of the extinguisher into the appliance and shut the door. If you have duct tape available, tape the seams to prevent air from getting to the fire.
- If possible, wet down the roof and other outside combustibles to prevent fires ignited by shooting sparks and flames.
- Make sure the fire department check all accessible areas of the flue or chimney by point them out to the crew.
- Contact a certified chimney sweep to inspect the flue before its next use.