

Chimney Fires

Fireplace and wood stoves are designed to safely contain wood-fuel fires, while providing heat for a home. The chimneys that serve them have the job of removing the byproducts of combustion; the substance produced when wood burns. These include smoke, water vapor, gases, unburned wood particles, hydrocarbons, tar fog and assorted minerals. As these substances exit the fireplace or wood stove, and flow up the relatively cooler chimney, condensation occurs. The resulting residue that sticks to the inner walls of the chimney is called creosote. Creosote is highly combustible. If it builds up in sufficient quantities, and catches fire inside the chimney flue instead of the firebox of the fireplace or wood stove, the result will be a chimney fire. Although any amount of creosote can burn, sweeps are concerned when creosote builds up in sufficient quantities to sustain a long, hot destructive chimney fire.

Chimney fires are often dramatic events, with flames and cinders leaping high enough to come to the attention of neighbors and passersby. But they're not all like this. They can also burn quite slowly if they aren't being fed by much air or fuel. These sleeper fires are no less dangerous than the more visibly dramatic ones. They still reach high temperatures and can damage the chimney and nearby combustible parts of the house. The heat can be so intense that it can actually pick the mortar out from between bricks or stones.

A roaring sound; some people describe it as sounding like a freight train or a low flying airplane, is typically the first indication of a chimney fire. If you hear this sound, and it's growing louder, you have every reason to believe there's a fire raging in your chimney.

Clouds of black smoke and sparks pouring out the top of your chimney are other indications of chimney fire. If it's a big fire, flames can leap several feet above the top of the chimney.

If you see or hear any of this:

- Call the fire department. The fire could be out before firefighters arrive, but it's a good idea to call them anyway.
- Get everyone out of the house.
- Extinguish the flames. Use a fire extinguisher. If you don't have a fire extinguisher, baking soda or salt pellets will work, but you'll have to use a lot of either substance. (What you don't want to use is water. It could make things worse by causing more steam and gases to enter the chimney, which could crack or warp it.)
- Go outside. Wet down the roof and the area around your house. This will lessen the chance of sparks igniting other combustibles. (Keep the water away from the chimney).
- **DON'T USE THE FIREPLACE OR WOOD STOVE AGAIN UNTIL YOU HAVE HAD IT INSPECTED AND CLEANED!**

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