

Get your fireplace ready for another cold season

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If you're like me, you are looking forward to spending some cool days and nights in front of a nice warm fire.

Fireplaces, however, can pose a risk to your family and home. To ensure your safety, there are some things you should do before you start the first fire of the season.

Know your fireplace

There are basically two types of fireplaces and chimneys used in the metro area: masonry fireplaces and chimneys and manufactured metal fireplaces and chimneys.

If your home was constructed after 1970, you likely have a manufactured fireplace. In most cases, both types of fireplaces are suitable for burning wood and function in generally the same way. It is relatively easy to tell which type of fireplace you have. If the area immediately around the fireplace opening is metal, you have a manufactured fireplace and chimney. If the area is brick or stone with no evidence of any metal, you have a masonry fireplace and chimney.

Inspect your chimney

No matter which type of fireplace, inspect the inside of the chimney for a buildup of creosote and the presence of unwanted guests. Creosote is a byproduct of burning wood. It builds up on the inside of the chimney and looks like small black lumps clinging to the inside of the chimney walls. Creosote is combustible and can cause a fire. Your inspection may reveal the presence of unwanted guests — birds, their nests, squirrels or even raccoons. If you see creosote or animals, call in a professional chimney sweep.

Inspect your fireplace

Look for loose bricks or cracks in the bricks. In a manufactured fireplace, you will see masonry liners or reflectors on the sides and back. Check for cracks in the liner. Cracks in firebricks or liners may allow excessive heat to get behind them. As with creosote, these cracks should be further evaluated and repaired by a professional chimney sweep.

Proper use

Once you are sure that your fireplace and chimney are in good shape, it is time to start the fire. Follow these tips to ensure a safe and pleasant fire:

- Make sure that the damper is open. The damper is a door in the top of the fireplace. Failure to open the damper will result in smoke coming back into your house.
- Always burn well-cured hardwood; never burn pine. Pine produces an excessive amount of creosote that will lead to more frequent cleaning of the chimney.
- Close the screen over the fireplace. This will keep hot embers from jumping out onto the floor.
- Never leave a fire unattended. Even with the screen closed, hot embers may end up outside the fireplace. You want to be there to put them back.
- Consider placing a nonflammable rug in front of the fireplace. This will keep any embers that do escape from damaging your floors.

Proper maintenance

Like changing the oil in your car, you should have your fireplace and chimney regularly maintained by a professional chimney sweep. A good rule of thumb is to have the chimney inspected every year. Qualified chimney sweeps can be found by contacting the Chimney Safety Institute of America at 317-837-5362 or www.csia.org.

Do you have a home repair question? Send e-mail to Ask the Inspector at H&G@ajc.com. Our expert, Bill Garwood, spent 15 years as a building contractor before becoming a home inspector in 1990. He is part owner of a residential inspection firm and a company providing training in building inspection and codes.