

# Important practices to care for a wood stove

Wood-burning stoves keep you cozy in the frigid winter months, but they also require a fair bit of maintenance. Perform the following practices regularly to keep your wood stove in prime condition.



## 1. Clean your chimney walls

If your wood stove is used regularly throughout the winter months, its chimney walls (or flue) should be cleaned each spring to remove accumulated creosote. The easiest way is to call in a professional chimney sweep. The chimney sweep will inspect the flue to make sure that it's safe and operational and can also check, service, and clean the stove. If you decide to do the job yourself, you must be confident about climbing onto the roof safely. Flue brushes and extension handles are available from wood-heating retailers. It's essential that the brush is the correct size for the chimney — if it is too large it may get stuck in the chimney. Once on the roof, remove the rain excluder cap and push the brush down the flue until it reaches the stove. Then pull the brush up again. Make sure that the stove is shut tightly and completely sealed with a drop sheet.

## 2. Handle creosote buildup

Creosote is a black, sticky, sooty material deposited on chimney walls or flues by smoke. Creosote can burn, making it a fire hazard, and it can build up to such a point that it partly or completely blocks the flow of air through the chimney or flue, making the stove smoky and

hard to light. Check the flue regularly for buildup. For most wood-burning stoves, you will probably need to clean the flue annually.

A vertical flue can be checked by holding a mirror inside the stove when it is cold. Hold the mirror at a 45-degree angle directly under the flue opening. You should be able to estimate the amount of creosote buildup by the amount of daylight you're able to see filtering through the top of the chimney. A less reliable estimate can be made by tapping the flue with a finger. The tapping should produce a resonant, metallic sound if the pipe is clear, and a dull sound if the pipe walls are laden with creosote.

### 3. Eliminate draft reversal

An age-old problem of fireplaces and stoves is draft reversal, which is when warm air flows into the room rather than up the chimney. This is most common with external-wall chimneys. To counteract the effect, open a window near the stove. Also, before starting the fire, ignite some paper under the stove's exhaust flue or in the stovepipe. Once the chimney is warm, air will be drawn upwards.

### 4. Guard against radiant heat

Protect floors and walls from radiant heat — the fire does not have to be exposed for it to cause flammable materials to ignite. A radiant heat stove will heat most effectively if it's located towards the centre of the house. Central placement of circulator-type stoves is less important; put them where they take best advantage of natural air-flow patterns.

From removing creosote to guarding against heat, it's important to maintain your stove so that it stays both functional and safe. Do that, and it will continue to provide you warmth and comfort when you need it most. Is anyone chilly?

# Handy tips to keep your chimney safe and clean

Where there's fire, there's smoke — and when it's in your fireplace, you'll eventually have a chimney that needs a clean sweep. Chimney fires occur when creosote, a highly combustible residue created by burning wood, ignites. The resulting flames are hotter than the wood in your fireplace and the hot sparks that burst from the chimney could set your home on fire.



## 1. To prevent chimney fires

- Have your chimney cleaned regularly by a professional chimney sweep. Cleaning chimneys is difficult, dangerous work that requires special brushes and equipment tailored to fit the precise measurements of your fireplace flue.
- However, you can and should clean out the ashes in your fireplace when they start piling up.
- Shovel the ashes into a metal container with a tight-fitting lid — never a paper bag — and store it away from any combustible materials (including a wooden deck) before final disposal.
- The frequency of chimney cleaning will depend on how much you use your fireplace. At the least, an annual inspection is needed.

## 2. To inspect a chimney yourself

- You need to be in good shape and not mind climbing on the roof. Use a tall ladder to gain access to the roof and check that the tiles are not wet and slippery.
- With the aid of a powerful torchlight, check the chimney openings both from the hearth and from the roof.
- On the roof, you'll have to remove any spark arrester or chimney cap before you start.
- Look for obvious obstructions like bird nests. This is important even if all you have is a gas-log fireplace.
- While gas burns more cleanly than wood, a gas fireplace must be inspected for proper venting to keep odourless, poisonous carbon monoxide out of your home.
- Check the extent of creosote build-up. The creosote will be black or brown and could vary from a dripping tar-like substance to a shiny hardened mass. The highest concentration of creosote usually occurs in the top one-third of the chimney.

## 3. Look for indications of a past chimney fire

- Chimney fires, which roar hot until the energy source is spent or extinguished, sometimes occur without anyone realising it. Such fires can weaken the mortar, crack the tile lining of the chimney or even cause the lining to collapse. Any of those factors mean that heat from subsequent fires could reach and ignite combustible parts of the house, such as the wooden framing.
- Signs of a chimney fire include puffy creosote with rainbow-coloured streaks, warped metal on the damper or metal smoke chamber, cracked or missing flue tiles, creosote flakes or chunks on the roof, and cracks in the exterior masonry.
- Inspect the outside of your chimney to make sure there are no cracks that could allow water to seep in.
- In very cold areas, changes in temperature will cause water that leaks in to freeze and thaw, which can cause mortar to crumble.

## 4. To find a chimney sweep

- Check the Yellow Pages.
- Make sure that the company you choose carries business liability insurance in the event of accidents.

## 5. To cut down on creosote build-up

- Only burn wood that's been dried for six months to a year.

- Freshly cut wood has a higher moisture content than seasoned wood, which results in a smokier fire.
- Hardwoods, such as eucalyptus, burn more slowly and with a steadier flame than softwoods, such as pine, which cause faster creosote build-up.
- Never burn painted or chemically treated wood.